

An Open Response

Acts 17:1-34

It's funny how kids can bond over the most random connections – the street you grew up on, a favourite sports team or pizza topping. I once made a friend because of alphabetical order: My last name starts *L-O-E* and his started *L-O-C*; that's how Ben Lockyer and I got seated together in high school, and how I wound up at a little church called *Fairview Louth*, which later became *Southridge Community Church*. Recently, my daughter and I have bonded over *Greek Mythology*. Her interest was piqued by reading *Percy Jackson*, the story of a teenaged boy who discovers he's the offspring of the god *Poseidon*. When she found out that, during my very brief stint at university, I took *Greek Language & Greek Mythology*, she wanted to know *everything*. Ever since, we've been *Greeking Out* on Zeus, Ares, Heracles, Jason & The Argonauts and, of course, Athena, goddess of *wisdom* and *war*, and, for in our story in Acts, mother of *Athens*.

As we come to Acts 17, we find Paul in *Greece*, first appearing in *Thessalonica*, where:

“...on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,’ he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.” (Acts 17:2-4)

As was Paul's strategy, he goes to the synagogue, to reach those already familiar with the Jewish scriptures and Messianic promises, announcing *Jesus* to be *The Christ* (which is not Jesus' last name; it's the Greek equivalent of the Jewish word, *Messiah*, meaning *Anointed One*) While some joined them in following Jesus, a group of Jewish leaders referred to by Luke as *a mob* of *wicked men* who *set the city in an uproar*, go to the local authorities and accuse them, saying,

“These men who have upset the world have come here also... and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

The Acts of the Apostles 17:6-7

Paul and his companions are accused of *upsetting the world* or, as some translations put it, *turning the world upside-down*, which was true, in a sense, though I'm sure they saw it more as turning the world *right-side-up* again. The word *upset* here is so close to the Greek word for *resurrection* (like an *up-rising*) that Luke seems to be winking at us, the reader. Their accusation, however, is no joke. They are being accused of defying *Caesar* – *a capital crime* – by declaring allegiance to *another* king, *Jesus*. While this was *also* true, they were twisting things to cause trouble for Paul and his friends, motivated once again (*as we see in Verse 5*) by *jealousy*.

So, Paul escapes under the cover of night to another city called, *Berea*:

“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.” (Acts 17:11-12)

Here, Paul finds an eagerness not yet seen in Acts. The noble Bereans gather *daily* to dig into the Scriptures to see for themselves if Paul's claims about Jesus are true, and *many* believe. But before long, agitators from Thessalonica (*who had apparently followed them to Berea*) start causing trouble for Paul and he's once again whisked away, this time to Athens, where the bulk of our story occurs. Here in Athens, set against the monumental backdrop of the Acropolis, the Parthenon, and the Areopagus, Luke records one of Paul's most brilliant and beautiful speeches. As our story begins, Paul is waiting for his traveling ministry partners, Silas & Timothy, to join him, so he begins searching for an open door through which to introduce Athens to Jesus.

“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So, he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” (Acts 17:16-18)

Athens is one of the world's oldest cities, known as the birthplace of democracy, a centre for art, education, and philosophy. The *Stoics* and *Epicureans* were the leading philosophers of their day, offering a more progressive way of thinking than the old Greek gods and myths. With two opposing schools of thought, the *Stoics* had abandoned the many Greek gods in favour of one single divine-yet-impersonal presence that, like *The Force* in Star Wars, surrounds, fills, and animates everything and everyone, seeing good and evil are *neutral* realities. For a Stoic, the key to life is to not get too worked up about anything, but simply accept life as it is, go with the flow, and be one with nature. The *Epicureans*, on the other hand, still believed in the Greek gods of old, but saw them as distant and withdrawn from the human experience. They don't hear our prayers or involve themselves in our affairs, and they aren't waiting around to reward or torture us in the afterlife. To the Epicurean way of thinking, the best you can do is enjoy life while it lasts. After all, this present world, and the few temporary pleasures it offers, is all there is.

Enter Paul, who shows up talking about *Jesus* and *Resurrection*, which they see as either nonsensical babbling or, perhaps, the introduction of new *foreign gods*. Now, the Greek word for *Resurrection* is, *Anastasis*, which the Athenians, assuming Paul couldn't possibly mean actual *resurrection*, took as the name of a new female deity, maybe Jesus' wife. Before Paul can clarify,

"...they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.' (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)" (Acts 17:19-21)

What may not be immediately obvious to us is that Paul has been *arrested* here, taken to the Areopagus to *stand trial*. When Luke says they ***"took"*** (in some versions, *seized*) Paul, it's a Greek word that also means, *arrested*. And while the *marketplace* might've been ideal for *doing*

nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas, Paul was taken to the *Areopagus*, literally, *Ares' Hill* (or *Mars' Hill*, if you're *Roman*), which was named for the *Greek god of war*. The *Areopagus* was like the Athenian supreme court. In Greek mythology, *Ares* was said to have been tried there for murdering Poseidon's son. In more recent (*and less mythological*) history, it was the place where Socrates, the most famous of all Athenians, was sentenced to death for *corrupting the youth* and (you guessed it!) *advocating foreign deities*; the same charge Paul now faced. Now, if you're confused as to why, in a culture so steeped in mythology, *advocating foreign gods* was such a serious crime, you need to appreciate that, while the ancient Greeks were smart enough to know their gods were, well... just *myths*, they took them *very* seriously. In a kind of *polite fiction*, the entire social fabric was built around honouring the gods of the city. They had temple worship, civic holidays and festivals, and shops where you could buy your own personal shrine for home use. Everyone was expected to play along, and you didn't mess with the system by introducing competing new gods, which could affect crops, businesses, or incur the wrath of the *old* gods. So, when Paul is asked about his *new teaching* and *strange ideas*, it's more than just curiosity; they're interrogating him, prosecuting Paul in the land's highest court.

"Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

The Acts of the Apostles 17:22-23

Paul begins his defense, *like a kid bonding over pineapple on pizza*, by praising their religious devotion, even to gods they didn't know. This wasn't just a place-holder shrine for any deities they might've missed; the Athenians had come to believe there was a god in their midst, an active, unexplained divine presence who, despite being unknown to them, deserved worship

and devotion. It might seem strange to worship an *unknown god*, yet many people in our world today, who identify as deeply *spiritual*, practice their beliefs without personally identifying the centre of their faith by name, beyond maybe a vague reference to *a higher power, the universe, a spiritual connectedness, or the divine self*. Seeing temples like these as open doors to faith, Paul begins to tell the Athenians about the god who, until now, has remained *unknown* to them:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill.

The Acts of the Apostles 17:24-29

More than just a beautifully-crafted speech, this is a brilliant take-down of the Athenian worldview, dismantling both their traditional mythologies and their progressive philosophies. Having wedged open the door to faith by way of the *unknown god*, Paul now critiques their *misguided* devotion to gods who are, in fact, no gods at all. The *real* God, Paul claims, is not a *foreign god*; but the original, ever-present maker of us all, as near as our breath, preexisting Athens itself and presiding, *unlike their gods who only had local jurisdiction*, as Lord over heaven and earth. This God can't be kept in a human-made temple, like those that littered the Athenian skyline which, remarkable as they may be, are lifeless and empty, dedicated to gods that require human effort to artificially prop up their existence. Paul's God, by contrast, is the God who gives life and breath to everything and everyone. They're gods must be fed sacrifices daily, but Paul's God is the one who nourishes all human existence. They'd built great temples, but Paul's God created the entire cosmos. *Their* gods, not *Paul's*, were the truly *unknown* and *foreign* threat.

Now, before we get too smug about these silly idol-worshippers, consider the temples and shrines that litter the skyline of *our* culture and lives *today*. We don't call them temples, but how else would you describe our devotion to screens and technology, billion-dollar sports and entertainment empires, stadiums where we pledge allegiance to team colours, remove our hats to honour the gods of nationalism, belt out pop-anthems like hymns to self-expression, or the fitness sanctuaries where we sculpt our bodies into statue-like idols to beauty and youth, stock markets and betting apps where we sacrifice our savings to the gods of chance, social media, with its stained-glass image-crafting, confession-booth-style comment sections, and the holy sacrament of accepting the Terms & Conditions. From news outlets whose priests of persuasion indoctrinate us for political parties promising salvation from the devils on the other side, to the hallowed halls of academia, keepers of the secret knowledge, to annual national festivals to the gods of our appetite, feasts celebrating deeply-held myths of self-made success. Our world is full of *idols*; we just call them *ideals*, the big existential themes of freedom, democracy, justice, love, sex, power, success, and progress, distorted by disconnection from the personal presence of the God whose image they reflect. *These are our gods, though they're no gods at all.*

Having dismantled their (and *our*) idols, Paul turns to the philosophers. Apparently, while mingling in the marketplace, Paul had done more than *debate* them; he'd done his *homework*, now able to use their own words to win them. In contrast to the impersonal spirituality of the *Stoics*, Paul describes God as deeply personal; surrounding, filling, and animating all things, yes, but not just as some *higher power*, rather as expressed in a then popular Greek poem about Zeus, by Aratus of Soli, Paul says, ***"As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"*** (Acts 17:28) God is our *parent*, and we God's *children* – *that's about as personal as*

it gets! And in contrast to the distant, indifferent gods of the *Epicureans*, Paul describes God as intimately involved and invested in human affairs, inviting us to ***“seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’*** This last line is from a poem by *Epimenides* (also about Zeus) which reads,

***“They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one,
Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies.
But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,
For in you we live and move and have our being.”***

—Epimenides, [*Cretica 1*](#))

God’s *not* dead, but very much *alive*, not absent or uncaring, but present in our *being* and our *breathing*, alive in each *moment* and *movement*. In his closing argument, Paul declares:

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (17:30-31)

Now, it’s one thing to call the Athenians *ignorant* (after calling their gods *fake* and their temples *rubbish*, while *on trial for your life*) but Paul goes one step further, instead of *defending himself*, by actually *prosecuting them*, calling all Athenians to turn from their idols to Jesus (that’s what *repent* means), *because*, he concludes, *God* (not the *Areopagus*) is the *real* judge who will bring *final* justice; by way of Jesus, the man God raised from the dead. (*You gotta give it to Paul; he’s got guts!*) But this is where the wheels fall off. Realizing that Paul actually was talking about *resurrection*, his trial ends with a mix of mostly ridicule and rejection. Luke writes,

“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” (Acts 17:32-34)

Though most just mocked Paul, a *few* became curious, while a *few others* joined them in following Jesus, most notably *Dionysius* (a sitting member of the *Areopagus*) and an important

woman named, Damaris, *and a few others*. A *few* tire-kickers and *a few* new believers. The key word here is *few*, particularly in contrast to the responses in the other Greek cities Paul visited.

Remember *Thessalonica* where, over a period of some months, they spent some three Saturdays listening to Paul, with *some* people showing *some* interest, and ***“some” (v.4)*** began following Jesus? The keyword in Thessalonica was *some*. In *Berea*, however, they searched the scriptures *eagerly, every day, for many days*, and ***“As a result, many of them believed” (v.12)*** and became followers of Jesus – *men and women, Jewish and Greek*. The keyword in Berea was *many*. But in *Athens*, where there was only casual curiosity in the marketplace, a bit of debate and banter with whoever ***“happened to be there” (v.17)***, and only one formal inquiry into Paul’s claims, there, only a *few (few enough to be individually named)* turned to Jesus. Luke wants us to notice the correlation between the levels of investment in seeking Jesus and the resulting response. Those with only passing interest and casual curiosity were barely affected; only a *few* found Jesus. Where there was *some* higher level of interest, once-a-week investment over a span of *some* weeks, *some* joined the movement. But where they gave their *full* attention and energy to seeking Jesus, the Spirit was able to move far more freely, bringing new life to *many*.

The question for us is, are we *Some*, *Few*, or *Many* kind of people? As you consider *your* spiritual engagement, are you, like the *Athenians*, a casual observer or curious on-looker with only a vague interest in debating and bantering the idea of Jesus? Or, like the *Thessalonians*, have you tried God, put *some* effort into seeing if Jesus is for you but, after some time, settled into a *“some”* kind of faith: showing up to church *sometimes*, connecting *somewhat* with other believers, maybe even contributing *something*, telling yourself you’ll do more *someday*. Or, are we more like the *Bereans*, cultivating an *everyday* faith, eagerly devoting our *whole* lives to

seeking and following Jesus, leaning into the *many* ways there are around here to connect, grow, and serve. Are we *few*, *some*, or *many* people; because, as in any relationship, you get out of it what you put into it. Our attention gets divided between so many competing affections, but Jesus isn't looking for *part-time* followers who worship him in a sporadic, once-a-week, *temple-to-an-unknown-god* kind of way; he wants deeply-invested, all-in, fully-devoted followers who will participate in turning the world upside-down by first letting him turn *our* hearts right-side-up. But this only happens as we cultivate daily, eager, seeking and reaching for the God who is closer than our breath, alive and present in our *living*, our *moving*, and in our very *being*.

As the band comes to lead us... I hope you sense God longing to personally connect and bond with you, *not over pizza toppings or alphabetical order*, but over a deep desire to help you experience the full and fruitful abundant life that flows out of being personally connected in relationship with Jesus. It's what Jesus, in the S.O.A.P. exercise we did earlier, calls ***abiding in him***; making our home in his presence, nestling our lives in his love. If you're anything like me, we tend to *abide* in all kinds of *other* things, living as temples of fear, fantasy, ambition, comfort, and most of all *self*. But Acts 17 invites us to abide in *Jesus*, to dwell in and be indwelt by a God, no longer *unknown* to us, but one with whom we have a daily, active, life-giving communion, in whom *we live, and move, and have our being*. As we abide in Christ and he in us, we become *living* temples, made not of bricks and stone but of flesh and blood, reshaping the skyline of our world as living shrines to the *real* God revealed in the risen Jesus. This is an open invitation to all. The question is, how will we respond? Will we be *few*, *some*, or *many* people? Will we remain content worshiping an unknown god, or flirting with the idols of our culture, or will we daily open our lives to abiding in Christ and making room as his temples for Jesus to abide in us.