

Mission to the Unreached: Part 1



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Acts 17, 1 Cor. 2:2, Rom. 1:18–25.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Acts 17:24, NIV*).

Depicting what Paul did in Athens, Luke wrote: “Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there” (*Acts 17:17, NKJV*).

Naturally, Paul would have been most comfortable working among the Jews, his own flesh and blood. But Paul refused to be satisfied with working among only his own people. He had been called to reach others, as well.

Or Paul could have worked just with the “God-fearing” Gentiles, whose worldview already had undergone substantial change. They had a biblical foundation that Paul could build upon, even if they still needed to know the God whom they “feared”—Jesus the Messiah.

But, no. While in Athens, a city famous for its philosophy, Paul sought to reach the people there, as well. Many of these had a radically different background and worldview from that of the Hebrews and their sacred history, which formed the foundation of the faith that Paul wanted to teach the Athenians.

How did Paul go about seeking to reach these people, and what can we learn from his attempts?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 9.

A Hebrew in Athens

Read Acts 17:1–16. How did Paul wind up in Athens, and how did he respond to what he found there?

The city of Athens was “given over to idols” (*Acts 17:16, NKJV*). Knowing the history of his own people and their proclivity (despite the endless warnings) to idolatry, Paul was upset at all the idols he found in Athens, as well. No question, Paul was motivated by compassion for the Athenians, who would die in their sins if they did not learn of the true God.

Today, our cities are still full of idols, even though they are less obvious than what Paul saw. And unfortunately, many believers are fully capable of walking through a city without reacting in the least to its idols. Paul, though, was tuned in to the Holy Spirit enough to respond. Out of step with some other believers, who still didn’t grasp that the gospel was for all the world, Paul knew that God wanted the Athenians to be saved along with everyone else. He understood that the global mission concept was to take the gospel to those who were entirely unreached, including idol-worshipping pagans, as well as the philosophers who filled the streets of Athens.

Paul, therefore, frequented the marketplace where these people were to be found. We might say that he formed the first Global Mission Study Center, where he used the marketplace to study and test methods of reaching the hearts and minds of these pagans.

Paul knew that he could not approach the Athenians in the same way that he approached Jews or even God-fearing Gentiles. These were people whose starting point was not the God of Israel or His works among the nation of Israel. No matter how central these concepts and beliefs were to the Jews and even to the God-fearing Gentiles, they meant nothing to the people Paul encountered in the Athenian marketplace. Hence, an entirely new approach would be needed.

Today, we often seek to reach people whose background has nothing in common with what has been called “the Judeo-Christian” heritage. Hence, like Paul, we need to adapt. An approach that might work fine, for example, in Buenos Aires could be useless in Bangkok.

What kind of idols are people worshiping in your society, and how can you open their eyes to how worthless it all is?

Paul in the Areopagus

No matter where he was, Paul, given his commission from God, was going to preach the gospel. So, that's exactly what he sought to do in Athens.

Read Acts 17:18–21. What were some of the different ways that the pagans in the marketplace reacted to Paul's speaking and questioning?

Clearly, with his “foreign gods,” Paul made an impression on these people in the marketplace (*Acts 17:18*), and so they took him to the Areopagus, a part of the city where legal and religious matters were adjudicated, though it does not seem as if Paul was facing any kind of legal trial. It was just, it seemed, to give him and his “new doctrine” (*Acts 17:19*) a hearing. It would be hard to ignore someone of Paul's eloquence, passion, and intelligence, even if he were promoting ideas that seemed very strange to these people.

Acts 17:21 says the Athenians did nothing but talk about and listen to the latest ideas. Was Luke accusing them of laziness? Probably not. More likely he was pointing out that they were experienced thinkers and debaters. After all, the Greeks produced such men as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, philosophers whose influence has reached down to our day, as well. Athens for centuries had been seen as the center of intellectual and philosophical thought. Though some of these thinkers were not atheists, certainly not in the sense that we think of atheism today, many of their philosophical ideas were radically different from the teachings of Christianity. It's hard, for example, to find a place in the philosophy of the Epicureans and Stoics for something like a resurrected Messiah.

In Athens, Paul had expected that the Holy Spirit could use his knowledge and oratorical skills, which he had gained in his education under Gamaliel. But in reality it was Paul's education on the streets of Athens that the Holy Spirit was able to use even more. “The wisest of his hearers were astonished as they listened to his reasoning. He showed himself familiar with their works of art, their literature, and their religion.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 237.

After Paul's experience in Athens with these pagans and philosophers, he wrote to the Corinthians that “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV). What lesson is there for us about how central Christ must be to our message regardless of whom we are preaching to?

Paul and the Unknown God

Notice that Paul did not disparage the false religion or false gods of the Athenians. He gathered whatever points of good he could find, few as they were, and capitalized on them.

Read Acts 17:22, 23. What was Paul doing here in his attempt to reach these people with the gospel?

“ ‘People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious’ ” (*Acts 17:22, NIV*). Paul was complimenting pagans! Their religion was misguided in every way, and yet, Paul complimented their devotion.

Paul continued, “ ‘As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship . . .’ ” (*Acts 17:23, NIV*). By describing his own study of the Athenian religion, Paul communicated a respectful attitude toward the people. He was not rushing in as a self-proclaimed expert with all the answers for how the people needed to change. In reality, he was, in fact, an expert and did, in fact, have the answers that these people needed! But he did not present himself that way, or else he would have been rejected outright. Instead, he was seen as someone who cared for the people and desired their good.

Commenting on the inscription, “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD” (*Acts 17:23, NKJV*), Paul took advantage of what could be seen as common ground. They believed in god (many, actually), which was a great start (some people back then didn’t believe) and could open the way to deeper conversation. He did not scoff at the negative idea of an altar to an unknown god. Instead, he appreciated and admired a people who cared enough about spiritual things to go to the effort and expense of worshipping something they didn’t even know, just in case they were missing something.

Were they misguided? Of course, but that could be addressed. What was important in the beginning was that they were devout in what they did understand. That, Paul recognized, was material the Holy Spirit could work with.

Paul had found a talking point that would pique their interest.

What bridges and points of contact can you think of that would open opportunities for deeper conversation with others with whom you come in contact?

Introducing a New God

Now that Paul had the attention of the thinkers in Athens, he turned his audience to the God of heaven.

Read Acts 17:24–27. What approach was Paul taking here in an attempt to reach these people?

For a people who cared enough about spiritual things to build an altar to an unknown god, Paul's words were intriguing: a Creator God who does not live in a temple needs nothing from humans, but instead supplies human needs. For a culture steeped in Greek mythology—in which the gods were unpredictable, self-centered, and cruel—the idea of a God like the one Paul described was a wonderfully intriguing thought. And the men of the Areopagus took their first baby steps toward a God of love.

The fact is that this God, whom they did not know, could be known! Indeed, He wants to be known, as well.

Paul probably spoke longer at the Areopagus than just the few words Luke shared in this story. It seems reasonable for the sake of space that Luke just summarized Paul's speech. If that is true, then each of the concepts we have read so far Paul probably fleshed out in more detail. Then we break down Paul's speech into concepts:

1. Paul first complimented their current spiritual awareness and sincerity.
2. Next he showed that he had studied their belief and that he found some things that he respected from what he had learned.
3. He then told them about one particular thing that he had discovered in his study of their religion that they admitted they did not understand.
4. After that, he shared the aspect of God that he knew they desperately needed, which is the fact that God exists and that He loves them and is not far away.
5. Finally, at the end of his speech, Paul moved to warning them of what it means to reject the knowledge of this God they did not yet know.

Paul took them as far as he could, based on what he knew about what they believed. If he could get them that far, he was making good progress.

Notice Paul's appeal to the created world and to God as the Creator (see also Rom. 1:18–25). Why is this such a good approach to take, at least as a start, with most people? What is it about the created world that points so powerfully to God?

Crossing a Line

Read Acts 17:24–34. How does Paul continue his witness?

It's also interesting to note that Paul actually quoted some of their own writers, who, having written something fairly close to biblical truth, gave Paul an opening to take his hearers further along. That is, he used his familiarity with their beliefs to seek common ground with them, only to then take it further. No question: in seeking to reach others, having a familiarity with what they believe and seeking points of common ground can be a powerful method of reaching people.

Notice, too, that Paul uses this common ground with them to go then to where he wanted to go: the resurrection of Jesus and the hope it offered them all. Luke described the reactions to Paul's closing words about the Resurrection. Some sneered at the idea; others said they wanted to hear Paul again on the matter; and some believed. What is key in this story for our purposes is that *all of them had actually listened*. And that was Paul's hope from the beginning.

We know that some people will reject the gospel, but we must do everything possible to ensure that before they reject it, they understand what they are rejecting. Paul, by his method of working among the Athenians and his strategic use of what he had studied and learned of them, ensured that they heard with open minds that a God existed whom they did not know but who had created them. This God loved them and wanted to be known by them. He had been merciful to them in spite of their ignorance. But Judgment Day was coming. And if all of this sounded too unbelievable, there was verifiable evidence for it in the resurrection of Christ.

Now that the people had actually heard and comprehended the message, they had to choose for themselves whether to reject it outright or investigate further. And some did investigate further and became followers of Jesus (*Acts 17:34*).

Challenge: In prayer, ask for God's specific guidance in knowing how best to witness to someone you know.

Challenge Up: Explore social media as a possible "Areopagus" for you to represent the gospel—with Paul's clarity and discretion—to unbelievers.

Further Thought: One of the primary takeaways from the story of Paul's experience at the Areopagus is its on-the-ground study of how to approach an unreached group of unbelievers, which resulted in a small group of believers starting in Athens.

"The words of the apostle, and the description of his attitude and surroundings, as traced by the pen of inspiration, were to be handed down to all coming generations, bearing witness of his unshaken confidence, his courage in loneliness and adversity, and the victory he gained for Christianity in the very heart of paganism.

"Paul's words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. He was in a position where he might easily have said that which would have irritated his proud listeners and brought himself into difficulty. Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 240, 241.

By his direct contact with the people, a study of their culture and religion, and his respect for their devotion to spiritual things, Paul managed something notable in Athens—something that is a treasure of knowledge for the church. *He avoided irritating his listeners.* This was in and of itself a major, God-inspired accomplishment. This, according to Ellen G. White, is the treasure of knowledge that we as a church need to pay attention to in this story.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 With the story of Paul in Athens as a model, what is the first step for anyone beginning new evangelistic work in a city?
- 2 What sort of behavior is required of a Christian to build bridges with people in the city (and frankly, anywhere else) who do not know God?
- 3 When we are provoked by the modern types of idols, what should we avoid doing, especially right at first, in starting new work among the people who worship those idols?
- 4 Paul could have stopped with just introducing the people to this God who loved them, and they would have been quite pleased. But then he crossed a line that made people think he was deluded when he brought in the Resurrection. Should he have done that? Why, or why not?

Mission Path to Spain: Part 4

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Luis Paiva decided to open a fruit stand in Spain. But he moved forward with fear, sensing that God was calling him to serve elsewhere. He also worried that his new business might prevent him from giving his all to God.

Two short weeks after opening the fruit stand, everything seemed to fall apart. His business was failing. His partners were cheating him. He fell ill and no longer could walk. But Luis didn't want to give up. He asked fellow Seventh-day Adventists for business advice. One of them, knowing that Luis had trained to be a pastor, reprimanded him. "You shouldn't be engaged in worldly business but in the business of winning souls for the Lord," he said.

For Luis, the rebuke was like hearing God's voice. But he felt even more hopeless. How could he serve as a pastor without a church? Luis talked over the matter with his wife, and they decided to return to their native country, Venezuela. Perhaps he could recover his health there.

A short time later, Luis got a call from Gabriel Diaz, a leader of the Adventist Church in Spain. The church was looking for a missionary to work in Lugo, a city in northwestern Spain. Luis was delighted at the prospect of returning to full-time ministry, but he acknowledged that he had serious health and business problems. "I'm not even able to walk," he said.

The church leader was not dissuaded, and the two men prayed together.

In two weeks, Luis regained his ability to walk, and he opened a house church in Lugo. On the first Sabbath, only two people, both church members, showed up to worship. But in just four months, 22 people were gathering in the house church every Sabbath. Among them were three newly baptized members and others preparing for baptism. In addition, Luis had opened a Bible study school and a school of evangelism to teach people how to win souls for God. He was making plans to plant an official church.

"We know that we have to win many souls in order for that to happen," he says. "But I trust God, and I have confidence in Him that this will happen because we are using Christ's method alone."

"Christ's method alone," according to Ellen White, "will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me'" (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 143).

As a pastor in Venezuela and later a missionary in Mexico, Luis never dreamed he would be serving God in Spain. "I'm here because of God's grace," he said.



Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offering that helps support missionaries around the world.

Part I: Overview

In His farewell speech before ascending to heaven, Jesus commissioned His disciples to be His witnesses among people of every nation of the world (*Matt. 28:19*). “Nations” in Matthew 28:19 refers not to nation states but to “people groups.” A people group refers to a group of individuals that have a common sense of history, language, beliefs, and identity. There is no human society on earth where the gospel of Jesus should not be presented and where disciples should not be made for Him. Frontline mission agencies, such as Global Frontier Missions and the Joshua Project, estimate that there are about 17,446 people groups in the world, with more than 7,400 of them considered to be unreached by the gospel. In other words, 42 percent of the world’s people groups lack indigenous communities of Christians who are able to evangelize, without an external witness, the rest of the people groups. Ninety-five of the least reached people groups by the gospel are spread across the 10/40 window, an area mostly populated by tribal people, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and the non-religious. Some of these people groups have little or no access to the gospel. People not yet reached by the gospel also exist in Western nations, because of the widening impact of secularism.

Part II: Commentary

Paul: A Versatile Missionary

This week’s study introduces us to witnessing to people who have nothing, or very little, in common with Christians in terms of religious beliefs and values. People of diverse ethnic origins and many dissimilar religious commitments live and share public life together. Because of their unique set of worldview assumptions, these people have different spiritual needs and aspirations. It is within this multireligious world that we are called to share our faith and make disciples for Christ. At first sight, this task is daunting. It necessitates venturing out of our religious comfort zones, exposing ourselves to unfamiliar jargons and codes, reevaluating our attitudes (stereotypes and biases) toward people with perspectives other than our own, and learning new evangelistic approaches. As if that were not enough, many non-Christians do not view Christianity favorably. Fortunately, we have in the Bible precedents of missionary endeavors to reach such people.

After his conversion to Christianity, Paul demonstrated untiring commitment to the propagation of the gospel to all nations. However, Paul approached his audiences differently, depending on whether they were Jews or Gentiles. In comparing what he said to the Jews at a synagogue

in Antioch (*Acts 13:13–43*) with his presentation of the gospel to a Gentile audience at the Areopagus in Athens (*Acts 17:16–33*), we see that Paul showed a great deal of sensitivity to his given situation, as well as to his audience. In Antioch, Paul quotes Scripture to build his case that Old Testament prophecies find their fulfillment in Jesus. In Athens, Paul begins with what his Gentile audience was the most familiar with: the altar to the unknown God and sayings of their own poets, instead of a series of Bible passages. Paul uses what his audience knows to speak to them about “the Lord of heaven and earth,” who created everything. Without condoning the Athenians’ beliefs, Paul commends them for being religious. This positive statement about his audience might have been intended to secure their interest in the rest of his speech. Although he was deeply disturbed by the multiplicity of their idols, Paul was restrained in his behavior. Any display of anger and accusations against these people who had no knowledge of God’s special revelation would have deprived him of a precious opportunity to present the gospel to them. It is important to note that Paul’s sensitivity to the Athenians’ life situations did not prevent him from calling them to repentance.

The above point is best illustrated by Mark Allan Powell’s 2004 publication of the results of his research on the impact of people’s daily realities on their reading and interpretation of Scripture (see Mark Allan Powell, “The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke’s Parable of the ‘Prodigal Son,’” in *Literary Encounters With the Reign of God*, Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim, eds. [New York: T & T Clark, 2004]). In the first phase of this research, Powell surveyed two groups of seminary students, one in the United States and the other in St. Petersburg, Russia. The experiment consisted of asking the students to read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32, close their Bibles, and then recount it from memory as accurately as possible to one another in their respective groups. Powell discovered two major differences in the oral recounting of this parable. On one hand, while only 6 percent of the American students remembered the famine mentioned in verse 14, 84 percent of the students in St. Petersburg referred to it. On the other hand, 100 percent of the American students emphasized the prodigal son’s squandering of his inheritance, whereas only 34 percent of the Russian students remembered this detail. For the American students, the mention of the famine seems to be an extra detail that adds nothing fundamental to the story. Because they had no recent recollection of famine, they all emphasized the squandering of wealth as irresponsible behavior. However, for the Russian students, who lived and interacted with some of the survivors of the 900-day Nazi army siege of the city of St. Petersburg in 1941, which triggered a famine that killed up to 670,000 people, the mention of the famine was a significant detail that added a lot to the story. This experiment is a good illustration of the need to adapt our message to our audience, both in style and content, just as Paul did with the Athenians.

Need for Innovation in Mission Praxis

Compared to his contemporaries, Paul was unconventional in his approach to ministry, especially in Athens. He could even be described as avant-garde when it came to the need to be versatile and adaptive in mission. His unique missionary qualities are desperately needed today. The modern-day Areopagus exists in different parts and forms in many urban centers. It could be a city square, a park, a street corner, a shopping center, a university amphitheater, or a café. The church needs members with corresponding gifts, talents, personalities, and creativity, empowered and released for ministry in such centers. Members who are equipped to enter into nontraditional spheres, as well as engaged non-Christians, should be entrusted with the latitude to explore new ways of sharing the gospel, even if these ways appear at first to be unorthodox.

God's asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son through whom God promised to make him the father of many nations, was unconventional (*Genesis 22*). Elisha's telling Naaman to "go in peace" after Naaman made his two strange requests (*2 Kings 5*) was very unsettling at best (see last week's lesson). God's telling Isaiah to roam the streets of the city naked for three years, declaring a message of doom for Judah's allies, was really bizarre (*Isa. 20:2-4*). Think about the embarrassment Micah might have felt when God asked him not only to walk around naked but to howl like a jackal and moan like an owl (*Micah 1:8*)! In light of these biblical precedents, "When read in its context, the Bible offers many statements and examples that show God's approval for methods of mission that may go against the grain of our comfortable practices. Broad reading and the clear texts of the Bible . . . suggest that God is more open and creative than we are. If that is the case, we should not be quick to condemn that which is different or uncomfortable."—Jon Paulien, "The Unpredictable God: Creative Mission and the Biblical Testimony," in *A Man of Passionate Reflection*, Bruce L. Bauer, ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2011), p. 85. Instead of continuing to plow the mission fields with traditional methods, we need to be flexible, resourceful, and open-minded in regard to new, and even unfamiliar, approaches to God's mission. Mission originated with God and remains His provenance. We therefore need to be dependent on Him. As King Jehoshaphat did, let us always turn to God, saying, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (*2 Chron. 20:12, NIV*). If we are sincere, God will reveal His will to us. Maybe His way will not be conventional to us just as Jehoshaphat was instructed to send his army to war with singing. But one thing is sure: doing mission and ministry God's way, and with God's power, will accomplish His salvific purposes of reaching all segments of society.

Part III: Life Application

All humans are influenced, and limited, by the assumptions of their cultures and their worldviews. That important fact should be taken into consideration in our presentation of the gospel. Paul's ministry offers us a good example of outreach to non-Christians. Below are a few basic principles meaningful to our mission to those who have not been exposed to the gospel:

- 1. People's cultures, with their deep-seated worldview assumptions, are their only frame of reference. People cannot be confronted with things that are beyond their frame of reference and be expected to respond positively to them. It is, therefore, essential to always be sensitive to the daily realities of the people to whom we witness.**

- 2. We need to act with restraint and respect in our attitude toward non-Christians. We can get significant insights about non-Christians by studying their belief systems and talking to them for the sake of finding common ground that could be used as a point of contact for presenting the gospel.**

- 3. We also should focus on our audience's felt needs and aspirations and show them how Christ answers them. We should not allow our own cultural perspectives to get in the way of how God wants to introduce Himself to non-Christians through us. It is important that, in presenting the gospel, we refrain from assuming that our audience knows what we know about God, cares about values we care about,**

understands the concept of sin as we do, and feels guilty and in need of God's forgiveness.

4. Finally, we need to guard ourselves against watering down our message in the process of adapting it to our audience. The gospel is meant to challenge aspects of all worldview assumptions that are not in line with Scripture.

Notes


