

Common Ground

Acts 17:10-31

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Background:

I recently read about a pastor who said that when their six children were small, they played a game called "Sardines." They made up two teams and turned out all the lights in their home and would hide in a closet or some other cramped place. One team groped about in the darkness to find the hiding place of the other team. The hidden team were squeezed together like sardines. Hence the name. The smallest child would become frightened in the dark. And so this pastor daddy would whisper to him softly: "Here I am." "I found you, Dad!" he would announce as he snuggled against his daddy in the darkness, not realizing that the dad let himself be "found." Likewise, we have been made to have this deep desire for safety, love, and significance. We are really "groping for God," as Paul put it so vividly. But here's the good news: *He is not at all hard to find, for "He is not far from each one of us."* He desires to make Himself known. Before we come to know Christ, we grope for God in the darkness. But if we search for Him in earnest, He will make Himself known, for He rewards those who diligently seek Him ([Heb. 11:6](#)). He will call to us softly: "Here I am."

MAP 1 - Paul goes on the mission move again, fleeing to the next place.

- He travels to one of the most glorious cities of the known world in His day.
- Travel by land from Berea to Athens is 202 miles.

Observations from the text:

1. It is a wise thing to search the scriptures for yourself. v. 11, 12

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

Paul and Silas are sent away by night to Berea.

- They follow the strategy by first going into the synagogue.
- Luke writes that the Berean Jews there were more noble-minded because they were eager to receive Paul's message and they compared it to their own examination of the Scriptures.
- Christian character is formed by our eagerness to hear and obey God's Word and examine the Scriptures on our own.

These Bereans showed their reasonableness by hearing Paul and examining the Scriptures for themselves to see if what Paul said was true.

- The word noble means "*fair-minded*."
- Are you giving the scriptures a fair chance?

Are you testing them in your life by your willingness to study the them on your own.

- Probably the greatest lesson that we learn from the Bereans is “*When it comes to the Bible, never trust an explanation without an examination!*”

So, whether it is your local pastor, a gifted TV preacher, a so-called “*scholar*” from the History Channel, a college professor, your favorite podcast, or anyone else, never trust their explanation without examining the text yourself.

- There are many false teachers out there who are deliberately distorting God’s Word and manipulating people for their own selfish purposes.
- And even respected preachers who have pure motives can make mistakes!

2 Timothy 2:15 Study to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

2. A spiritual witness begins with spiritual observation. v. 16-23

*16, 17 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. 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....22, 23 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, **I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 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.*

Tradition has it that in ancient Greece a devastating sickness once swept through Athens.

- To appease the gods, altars were built to every god imagined by the Greeks.
- Temples, statues, and alters to many gods covered the city.
- Yet the plague continued, so finally in desperation, another altar was built bearing these words: “*To the Unknown God.*”
- Soon afterward, the epidemic subsided.
- Then comes Paul, chased out of Berea on his second missionary journey. He flees Berea headed to the sea and ends up in Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea.
- He leaves word with those whom accompanied him to send Silas and Timothy to Athens asap.
- Athens was the home of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Pericles.

Athens was the intellectual center of the world, and scholars and thinkers all over the world traveled there to learn.

- Rome conquered Athens in 146 B.C. but let her retain her glory and supremacy, because the Romans loved everything Greek.
- Rome even accepted the mythological gods of the Greeks.
 - Zeus became Jupiter - King of the gods, god of sky and thunder; patron god of Rome.
 - Hera became Juno - Queen of the gods; wife and sister of Jupiter, protector of Rome's women; patron goddess of Rome
 - Poseidon became Neptune - god of freshwater and the sea, earthquakes, hurricanes and horses; often depicted with his trident.
 - Demeter became Ceres - goddess of agriculture, grain, women, motherhood and marriage; the lawgiver.
 - Athena became Minerva - goddess of wisdom, arts, trade and strategy.
 - Ares became Mars - god of war; guardian of agriculture; embodiment of aggression.
 - Aphrodite became Venus - goddess of love, beauty, fertility, sex, desire and prosperity; patron of wine.
 - Apollo stayed Apollo - The Archer; god of music, healing, light and truth.
 - Artemis became Diana - goddess of the hunt, the moon and birth.
 - Hermes became Mercury - god of profit, trade, eloquence, communication, travel, trickery and thieves; guide of dead souls to the underworld.
 - Dionysus became Vesta - Queen of the vestal virgins (female priesthood), goddess of hearth, home and family.

There were all these gods and many other "lesser" gods, with temples, statues, altars, and breathtaking architecture that paid homage to them.

- **Paul was provoked as he saw that the city was full of idols.**
- Calvin said that the human heart is an idol factory.
- Notice that none of these gods really have any morality.
- They all still center on being a better you and self effort.
- Our greatest problem is that we don't recognize the one true Creator God who is Holy (other than) and glorify Him as we should.

Few cities have equaled the splendor of Athens in the 5th century B.C.

- The architecture is astounding with grand temples topped with the magnificent Parthenon atop the Acropolis.
- In every Greek city the highest point of elevation housed a temple to one of their gods or goddesses.
- These locations were called the "*high places*"

Pagans usually worshipped at altars in these places because they were "*closest to heaven.*"

- In Greece the high place was called the *Acropolis*.
- *Acro* means height. (acrobatics, acrophobia)
- *Polis* means city.
- So the Aeropagus was a rocky hill to the west of the Acropolis where the council of leaders met.
- *Áreios* or *Ares* the Greek god dwells. *págos* means hill.

So Aeropagus means the hill of Ares. His Roman name was Mars.

- In Paul's time it had wide public functions but later became a purely judicial body that met there.

Paul is observing all these things.

- He observes the temples and statue idols.
- He perceives that the people are religious.
- He observes the objects and smells the incense and sacrifices.
- And he is grieved and provoked at all the empty worship.
- And he engages the people.

He begins in the Jewish synagogue.

- So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons.
- And then in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.
- Paul keeps His message centered on Christ.
- But in the synagogues his appeal is through the scriptures and the promise of God's Messiah.
- In the marketplace he appeals using Creation, and the Creators desire to reconcile His creation through His Son Jesus Christ.

While engaging in the marketplace he runs into two different groups of thinkers. v. 18 - Epicureans and the Stoic philosophers.

- **Epicureans** - those who followed the teachings of Epicurus.
 - He taught that pleasure is the chief goal in life, especially the intellectual serenity that is achieved by overcoming disturbing passions and superstitious fears, especially the fear of death.
 - He believed that at death the person ceases to be, and thus there is no afterlife.

Epicurus believed in the gods, but taught that they never got involved in human affairs.

- **The Stoics** - They followed the teachings of Zeno.
 - He thought that the good lies in the soul itself.
 - The Stoics taught that all people are basically good, and through wisdom, self-effort, and restraint one can be delivered from the passions and desires that disrupt an ordinary "good" life.

They sought to live in harmony with nature and put great emphasis on man's rational ability, his self-sufficiency, and his obedience to duty. This emphasis on their own ability also filled them with pride.

- They were pantheistic, regarding god as the earth soul, or mother nature.
- When you die, you become part of the earth/nature.

So when Paul brings up Jesus and the resurrection, they are intrigued.

- So, he was invited to discuss and debate with the intellectuals.
- As he walked about the city he sees the inscription, to the "unknown god". Seizing the opportunity, he proclaimed to his listeners, *"The One whom you seek to worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."*
- That one God, of whom they knew nothing, Paul knew personally.
- He presented Him as the *"Lord of heaven and earth."*

Since He is Lord, Paul calls for repentance, and for everyone to appeal to this Creator God for the mercy that He alone can give.

- For the world will someday be judged in righteousness by Jesus Christ.

You don't need to go through life searching for an unknown god, for the one true God has already revealed Himself to us through His Son.

- The moment we turn from our sin and receive Jesus Christ, trusting His saving work on our behalf, we come to know the Creator Himself.
- Do you know Him, or is He still unknown to you?

Do you see how important Paul's approach is?

- Same gospel message, different approach to engage his audience.
- Brothers & Sisters, The Holy Spirit wants to empower you and use you.
- See how important to have the eyes of the Spirit as we engage others.

Observations to consider:

- What is my context?
- Who is my audience?
- What do we have in common?
- How can I stir up curiosity?

3. A spiritual witness proclaims truth about God. v. 24-28

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 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, 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, 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.’

- And once you engage you audience, you confront them with uncompromised truth!
- Paul appeals to the conscience of the heart.