

This past week, I flew into Dallas, Orlando, and New York City. The view offers a glimpse of how large each city is. Whenever I see all those houses and apartment buildings and consider the sheer number of people they represent, I'm disturbed. I'm reminded of the vast number of people who devote their lives to empty idols, ignorant of God. I wondered if that was how Paul felt: **"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols."** Athens was filled with temples and monuments devoted to pagan worship—the most famous of which was the Pantheon. Seeing it, **"he was deeply distressed."**

Paul's distress spurred action. **"So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there."** He went into the city seeking conversations with Jews in the synagogue and anyone in the marketplace, where philosophers and students gathered to discuss issues.

Paul **"was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection."** Notice the sequence. Paul first saw the lostness of the city. This sight evoked inner distress. That distress provoked him to proclaim the gospel. Paul **saw, felt, and proclaimed Christ.** We should ask ourselves:

- **Do I see the lostness of my city?** If not, why not?
- **If so, am I deeply distressed by it?** If not, why not?
- **If so, does my distress provoke me to go tell about Jesus?** If not, why not?

"Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" were in the marketplace—two of the most influential philosophical schools. There would be people who followed a particular philosophical school, along with those who picked their favorite bits from the smorgasbord of philosophies and traditions.¹ Paul's message was the same for all: **"the good news about Jesus and the resurrection."** Let's ask: **Do I believe the gospel is what every person, no matter their religious persuasion, most needs to hear?**

Paul's evangelism drew a response. **"Some said, 'What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?'"** "Show-off" is literally "seed-picker"—birds hopping about picking up seeds. It was used for those who "pick up scraps of information" but "whose communication lacks sophistication."² "Seed-picker" is an insult, but the next response is serious. **"Others replied, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities'—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection."** The Athenians were proud of their traditional ways. They did not like someone "failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges" or "introducing new deities."³

With this in mind, **"they took him and brought him to the Areopagus."** Areopagus literally means "hill of Ares," the Greek god of war, equivalent to the Roman god Mars (thus, it's sometimes called "Mars Hill"). But Areopagus had another meaning. The Athenian Council—"was the chief court with jurisdiction over trials, with the right to exact exile and capital punishment." It previously met in the marketplace.⁴ By this point, they'd moved their location

¹ *ESV EC*, Acts 17:18

² *Ibid.*

³ "The Trial of Socrates," Wikipedia.

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Expanded Digital Edition., Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Ac 17:16–34.

to the Hill of Ares, and the Council became synonymous with the site (similar to using "The White House" to refer to the President and his administration.) So, "**Paul stood in the middle of Areopagus**" means he's standing before the highest court in the land, gathered to inspect his teaching.

We shouldn't read **verses 19-20** as a friendly inquiry. "**They took him and brought him**"—words that mean "grasp," "arrest," "pounce on," "be concerned about." **Verse 21** describes the background—the Athenians loved giving attention to new ideas, which is why the Council had to keep tabs on such things. Imagine that influential Senators "took you and brought you" to a full assembly of Congress. They begin, "**May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean?**" It doesn't take a genius to realize there's more at stake than "we just want to understand."

Four hundred fifty years earlier, the Athenian Council assembled for the trial of Socrates. Two charges were brought: desecration of "the pantheon of Athens, and corruption of the youth of the city-state; the accusers cited two impious acts by Socrates: 'failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges' and 'introducing new deities.'"⁵ Compare those charges with what prompted bringing Paul's appearance before the Areopagus: "**He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities.**" Socrates would be found guilty by a jury of 500 citizens and sentenced to death.

This is a serious inquiry with significant consequences: the freedom and safety of the new Athenian church are at stake. Paul's discourse is not primarily apologetic, evangelistic, or missional. He's offering a "civil address before political authorities in a situation in which legal issues of the continued work of the church are at stake."⁶ He must convince the Council that there is no cause to take civil action in response to his teaching and those who believe it.

We should notice that Paul stays respectfully on topic, focused on the question he's been summoned to address: Is he introducing new deities? He engages the civil authorities with respect, reason, civility, and self-control. Paul models the proper, diligent, intelligent, courteous, and courageous hard work of engaging civil authorities who may act with hostility against the Christian faith and values. **Ask yourself: Am I willing to do this sort of hard work, engaging civil authorities with respect, patience, and informed understanding?** If not, why not?

How does Paul accomplish this? He makes skillful connections with the beliefs and values of the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Areopagus—sometimes called "**contextualization.**" He opens with a statement that connects to the authorities and philosophers alike: "**People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship. . .**" Then connects his message: "**I even found an altar on which was inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.**" He proclaims what they acknowledge ignorance of: "**The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.**"

⁵ "The Trial of Socrates," "Asebaia," Wikipedia.

⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*.

Paul proclaims only one God—the Creator and Lord of everything. The Areopagus may be relieved to know that Paul is not teaching a competing Pantheon of new deities. Since God is the source of everything, he does not require the service of human beings or physical shrines—an idea the Epicureans would connect with.

“From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is 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 also his offspring.’” God is not far from us—he created us so that we might try to find him—a connection to the Stoics who believed the divine was present in everyone through reason. “We live in god,” he says, appealing to their poets, “For we are also his offspring.”

“Since, then, we are God’s offspring, we shouldn’t think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination.” The nature of this God is not like earthly materials crafted by humans—another connection with the philosophers.

Paul makes several cultural connections, but he also states cultural contradictions. He contradicts the ideas of a plurality of gods and any divine need for human service, shrines, or idols. These contradictions are brilliant, strategic components of Paul's task. Remember, he's there to address the concern that he is introducing new deities. The civil authorities worried that he was desecrating the Pantheon. The philosophers worried that a new deity would compete for space with their shrines and idols—and for the patrons whose wealth supported them. In the words of one commentator, Paul's argument is, **“since God the Creator requires neither real estate in Athens nor local patrons who take care of his cult, there is no need for the Areopagus Council to get involved.”**⁷

Of course, Paul can't conclude without addressing implications: **“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”** God is no longer letting ignorance go unaddressed. He commands everyone, everywhere, to repent as he will soon judge the world by his chosen man—proven by that man's resurrection.

A few observations about Paul's practice of contextualization:

- 1. Contextualization does not seek mere connection.** Paul pursued connecting a specific goal—the flourishing of the gospel.
- 2. Contextualization does not circumvent the gospel.** Paul *began* by plainly proclaiming the gospel in the marketplace. His contextualization is in response to concerns about it.
- 3. Contextualization does not confuse the gospel.** Paul is not turning the gospel into some vague, amorphous message about shared concepts. He's clear upfront on the gospel and contextualizes to remove concern and confusion.
- 4. Contextualization does not avoid contradiction or critique.** We cannot preach the gospel without forthright critique and contradiction of the culture's values and beliefs.

⁷ Ibid.

5. **Contextualization does not avoid painful consequences.** Paul addresses the need for everyone to repent and turn to the God known through the risen Messiah. He's not willing for the church to be harmed based on unwarranted concern. He *is* ready to die for making plain the implications of the gospel.
6. **Contextualization does not prevent contempt or guarantee converts.** “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, ‘We’d like to hear from you again about this.’” Paul delivered a masterpiece of religious and civil engagement—yet, he was ridiculed. Others, still interested, did not believe.
7. **Contextualization does provide help in civil engagement.** “So Paul left their presence.” They ended the assembly and let him depart without caution or restriction. His approach relieved their concerns.
8. **Contextualization is a means God uses for conversion.** “However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” Several people did believe, including Dionysius the Areopagite (a council member, one of the highest offices in Athens).⁸ Mentioned alongside him is Dionysius, who’s likely connected with the Council or a prominent religious leader.

With his life and the safety of the church at stake, how was Paul able to be so civil, self-controlled, and reasonable while engaging the civil authorities? He believed the gospel.

When we hope in Christ, we don’t have to live in fear of civil authorities or in a state of panic about what they’re doing. We believe Christ’s life is our righteousness and his death is the atonement for our sin. Therefore, God is pleased with us and for us. We believe Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God in power. So, we know that Jesus reigns over all powers and authorities, working all things for his glory and our good.

How have you responded to political uncertainty or government actions against the gospel and the church (whether real or perceived)? With outbursts, rebellion, inner turmoil, and readiness to fight? Or with calm, civil, respectful, intelligent dialogue with civil officials as you seek to alleviate concerns and demonstrate the good of the gospel?

Paul was deeply disturbed by unbelief. He was not disturbed by political threats and civil authorities. He knew God gave all authority to the risen Messiah. **When we hope in the gospel, we don’t fight to stake out ground in the kingdoms of this earth. Instead, we strive to bring others into the Kingdom of Christ.**

⁸ Ibid.