

Week 08
051/314

Transforming Daily
“... TO THE UNKNOWN GOD...”
Acts 17:23

At first reading, one might think that Paul had lost his mind. This statement seems to be sacrilegious, even very sacrilegious. But in fact it was very “unreligious.” That was the whole point of Paul’s presentation. Religion is what got the Athenians to this point of idolatry. It wasn’t that they weren’t religious or even spiritual, but they weren’t born again. So Paul was taking their “religious” momentum and trying to redirect their path. It was quite ingenious the way he presented the gospel in this manner.

As usual when sharing the gospel, the moment Paul “quit preaching and went to meddling” in the Athenians’ personal lives, most of them graciously shut him down. You see, as long as Paul enlightened them on matters they wanted to hear about or were interested in, which was any “new thing” (v.21), Paul was on even ground, but the moment he segued from his general explanation of “THE UNKNOWN GOD” to a personal presentation of the gospel, the whole meeting came to a screeching halt.

From the beginning of his explanation, it was Paul’s goal to use the Athenians’ idolatrous ways to slip the gospel into the presentation. Paul used both the fear of the Athenians and their knowledge of deities, or the lack there of, to peak their interest. He knew that they didn’t want to miss out on worshipping any and every god, hence the altar “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.” He also knew that while they knew something about the gods that were named in the Areopagus, that because the specific name of the God of the universe was missing, they didn’t know anything about Him. So Paul rightly chose their lack of knowledge, but willingness to hear, as an entry point for the gospel presentation.

The same strategy can be used today with those whom we share the gospel. We just have to be patient to look and listen for what can be seen and to what is being said from those with whom we share the gospel that we might find an appropriate entry point to do so. There are many ways to approach someone with the gospel. Not always are all of the ways appropriate given the specific circumstances. The goal is to be prepared and available. The very first verse of this story (v.16) tells the reader that Paul’s spirit was provoked within him. In other words, he was both repulsed by their idolatry, and yet at the same time, moved to compassion for the idolaters.

How do you respond to sin? How do you respond to sinners? Are you prepared and available to share the gospel? Idolatry isn’t just an Old Testament or first century notion and practice. It is alive and well in the 21st century. Most people today are personally given over to some god, or idol representing their god, and they can tell you more about their religious practice than most Christians can about their own. But what about and Who they probably don’t know or have personally given themselves, and Whose name it is the Christian’s privilege and responsibility to share, is TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.