

“A Study in Acts: An Unknown God?”

Acts 17: 22-31

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

May 17, 2020

Our annual observance of Pentecost—the birthday of the Church—will be upon us May 31. Wear red that Sunday! Today we’ll begin a “Study in Acts”, the book in the Bible that records the history of the Early Church. In preparations, I am again profoundly aware of the sacrifice of those first followers of Jesus Christ, and how, as a congregation we are indebted to their suffering in His name. If not for their courageous counter-culture witness in the world of the first century A.D., our world today would be different in ways we could only try to imagine.

The story is there in the Book of Acts. The lectionary texts for today and next Sunday amplify the Pentecost event. The record in Acts is attributed to Luke, the physician and Gospel writer, who was so personally impacted by Jesus as one of the twelve, and who later accompanied Paul for portions of his travels. The passage in Acts 17 deserves chronological and geographical context, and recognition of Paul’s zeal as a missionary, and comment about its implications for our own lives of faith. That is, how does Paul’s work matter to us?

As you will learn along the way today, I cannot escape personal connection with some of the geographic references.

The death and resurrection of Jesus occurred in 30 A.D. Let me remind you that, at that time, Paul was not Paul—he was Saul. Saul was an enthusiastic Pharisee from a strict Jewish family of Tarsus, which is 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Thanks to my Turkish friend of 35 years, Ahmet Uyan, I have visited the home that is considered Saul’s birthplace. Ahmet and his family live in Tarsus. For Saul, the message about Jesus threatened the core beliefs of Judaism, and he could see that it was growing

While Saul was studying with a renowned Rabbi in Jerusalem, Saul engaged in the persecution of Jesus's followers. He was a willing observer of the stoning of Stephen. Around 35 A.D., Saul was sent by the High Priest to quell the disturbances in Damascus. Again I remind you, it was during that assignment, on the road to Damascus that Jesus appeared to Saul in a vision. Jesus called him out: "Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Saul, the Jewish Pharisee, became Paul, the advocate of Jesus Christ. When the convert returned to Jerusalem three years later, some of the original disciples were skeptical of the sincerity of a man they had known as an active enemy of their faith and practice. Thus began in Early Christianity the division between the loyalists of Peter and the loyalists of Paul. Paul's subsequent travels, establishing churches throughout what is present-day Syria, Cyprus, Turkey, and Greece, took place between 48 A.D. and 61 A.D. He was ultimately imprisoned and executed in Rome, in 64 A.D.

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For more than 20 years after Jesus's death, the Jewish people were rebelling against the Roman stranglehold, leading eventually to the destruction of Jerusalem in 66 A.D. Paul's evangelism was not immune to that conflict, and in some ways may have benefitted from it. His audience was two-fold: Greek-speaking Jews, and God-worshipping Gentiles, many of whom were receptive to learning more about the Jesus movement. And Paul was not the only messenger: Acts records also the preaching of Peter, Stephen, and James. The general message of all of them was the same:

- 1) Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world.
- 2) Jesus's resurrection is key to God's plan of salvation.

3) Jesus fulfills the prophetic promises of the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament)

The increasing status of the Jesus movement in the volatile world of the time effectively undermined the authority of Caesar in Rome.

Such was the religious and political environment during which Paul undertook three separate journeys abroad to preach the story of Jesus. The second journey found him in Athens, which he had not originally planned. He had just left Berea, where he had been preaching with Timothy and Silas. Guess what? My home town in Ohio is Berea—named for that ancient city in Greece! And I found myself in Athens some nineteen hundred and forty-five years after Paul! I walked the marketplace that he surely walked. High above the marketplace I toured the Acropolis that he surely toured!

Athenians in Paul's day were consumed with intellectual pursuits and rival philosophies. The Epicureans, for example held that nothing existed but matter and space. For them, the chief purpose in life was happiness...pleasure...the avoidance of pain. By the same token, the Stoics held that by accepting fate, a person could live in harmony with nature, a self-sufficiency that leads to freedom and happiness. Epicureans, Stoics, any of the intellectuals would listen to Paul because they were always open to new ideas, and relished endless debate. The entry point for Paul in the conversation was that he had noticed altars all over town—altars honoring this pagan god or that pagan god—altars to idols. He observed one that said it was to an "unknown god". That's all the inspiration the preacher needed to seize the pulpit in front of the Council:

"I am here to tell you about the God you do not know. It's the God who made the world and everything in it. This God does not live in temples made by humans, or in images of gold, silver, or stone. Nor does this God need anything from us. This God has given us the means by which we can turn away from everything we have done wrong. God has given us Jesus Christ, who was resurrected from the dead, sealing forever our relationship to this One God!"

Some who heard this laughed at Paul. But a man named Dionysius, and a woman named Damarus, and a few others, believed. Paul never returned to Athens, and no church was established there then. He went on to Corinth, and stayed for more than a year, to begin a congregation the ruins of which I have been blessed to survey for myself.

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Not only CAN Paul's God be known. Paul's God—our God--WANTS to be known. So the question arises: If Paul were to walk the streets of our lives, what altars to idols would he discover?

The altar to pleasure, in the temples of Hollywood or Disneyland?

The altar to sport, in the temples of Nationals Park or FedEx Field?

The altar to food, in the temples of refrigerators and pantries?

The altar to pride, in the temples of diplomas and resumes?

The altar to prosperity, in the temples of Wall Street and the Mall of America?

The altar to partisanship, in the temples of self-righteousness and blame?

Would he discover an altar to an "unknown God", who wants desperately to be known?

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