

**Sent with Cultural Awareness: from Synagogue to Marketplace**  
*Pastor Terry Foester, February 27, 2022*

We've spent a month now exploring the early Sent Church from the Book of Acts!  
 The hope is that we become a church on the move.

We've seen that the early church was sent out with courage, with curiosity and this was empowered through a season of committed prayer. Coming out of this month we are entering a season of **Consecration and Expectation!**

During Missions Month, we collect a special offering that is connected to the focus. This year, the Faith Promise Offering will be used to help local refugees in the process of settling in our community. You've already given nearly \$14,000! (*Today is the last day to give*)

At the beginning of this month, we weren't exactly sure how this might work. Now, we are in the process of creating a "circle of care" team that will be equipped and trained to interact directly with several local refugee families in our community.

Today, as we wrap up the sermon series, we ponder: how do we engage with cultural awareness? How do we move out effectively from the church walls into the community? Or as we'll see in the example from scripture: *from the synagogue to the marketplace*.

### **Illustration: Great Distress >> Action**

Ukraine - a moment the world notices. A moment the world feels deeply - a collective great distress for cities and a country. It brings about a great distress and a collective burden.

We will see that Paul had a great distress about a city in today's story.

Paul arrives in Athens after being chased from Thessolonica and Berea by an angry mob. The mission team, at least for the moment, has been split up. Silas, Timothy and the others are hiding out back in Berea, and Paul is alone. He's on the run...and he finds himself hiding out in the bustling city of Athens. It's the perfect place to fade into the crowd, blend into the commotion.

### **Map Slides (4 slides, walk through them quickly with cues)**

As we read this text, we'll be asking ourselves two questions:

1. How did Paul engage with cultural awareness in the city of Athens?
2. What can we learn, as we apply this in our context?

Paul came into the city of Athens on the run!

### **Beginning in Acts 17, verse 16:**

#### **In Athens**

**16** While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, **he was greatly distressed** to see that the city was full of idols.

**17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. **18** A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?"

Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

**19** Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20** You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." **21** (*All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas*).

It's this first sentence that has really stopped me in my tracks this week: "*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens...he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.*"

Another version reads, "His spirit was provoked within him".

He could have so easily faded into the backdrop of the city, staying below the radar. *Isn't that our tendency?*

Paul still had new spiritual eyes. He sat still long enough to see the city, *really see the city*. His racing heart started to slow down...in this moment. Maybe his settled to 60 beats per minute. In sync with the passing seconds of time...looking out into the hills...seeing the hustle & bustle...his heart started beating with the purpose of God.

He was just passing through, all he needed was a city of refuge...suddenly the city of Athens captures his attention and he's cut to the heart.

By making a simple cultural observation he notices their captivation with idols. The landscape is riddled with countless statues and gods. I wonder if the words of the Prophet Habakuk were ringing in Paul's mind...

Habakuk 2:18-20  
*Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman?  
 Or an image that teaches lies?  
 For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation;  
 he makes idols that cannot speak.  
 Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'  
 Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!  
 Can it give guidance?  
 It is covered with gold and silver;  
 there is no breath in it."  
 The Lord is in his holy temple;  
 let all the earth be silent before him.*

We can imagine the scene. Paul looking out over Athens...sitting silently before the Lord while the City of Athens moves about in noisy idolatry. Paul's *great distress* leads him to step out. It leads him to movement. He begins to reason with anyone who will listen.

It describes him as moving from Synagogue to Marketplace. Day by day he proclaims Jesus & Resurrection.

**Paul was deeply distressed for a city that wasn't even his own.** In a way, Paul was there on business. No one would have criticized him for hiding out and *minding his own bees-wax*. Many of us have gone on trips for business or traveling on vacation...and all too often we go through the motions of *minding our own business* or taking in the sights as a tourist. We're task oriented or pleasure oriented.

Paul's distress led to an urgency to get involved, and it stirred up the people.

They ask, **What is this babbler trying to say?**

The word used for "babbler" is someone who is just in the way, like a pigeon pecking around for seed in the market square. This babbler is taking up space & needs to be shooed away. "*Birdbrain*" *he's just babbling, has nothing to offer.* But some want to hear more.

So, they invite him in! He is offered an invitation to come to the Areopagus (Mars Hill). The court of the Areopagus was a long-established body with extensive authority over the civil and religious and cultural life of Athens.

### **Mars Hill (Areopagus) PHOTO**

**Paul was invited into their space.** We tend to do the opposite. We invite people into our space and ask them to listen. Paul gets invited into their space and is asked to give a speech.

Paul is essentially invited in to give the equivalent of a **Ted Talk**. *They were interested in the latest ideas.*

**Paul's "Ted Talk" begins in verse 22...**

#### **Beginning in Acts 17, verse 22:**

**22** Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. **So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship**—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

**24** "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. **25** And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. **26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.**

**27** God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28** 'For in him we live and move and have our being. 'As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

**29** "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. **30** In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. **31** For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

There's been a lot of study over the eloquence of Paul's speech. He follows the form and the norms of the philosophers he engaged.

### **How did Paul engage with cultural awareness in the city of Athens?**

#### **(1) He observes carefully**

He effectively connected with their way of thinking...quoting their own poets while unapologetically declaring the truth of Jesus...some got angry and some wanted more, a few believed and even fewer followed.

He was walking through town...and came across an idol to an "unknown God" (In the Greek he would have read 'Agnostos Theos'. "Unknown God")

He knew how far they were from true worship. And it grieved him. His cultural awareness, and his observations helped him identify the place they needed the gospel most. The place they were in desperate need of good news. **They didn't know the name of God!**

**It's amazing some of the cultural similarities we face today.**

#### **He remembered he was once "far-off", and this brought humility.**

- His change from Saul to Paul was still a recent even in his life...and it was an act of God. Paul remembers the words of Jesus, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" He remembered firsthand what it was to be **far off** and what it was to be brought near. I believe this was the source of his distress for others.
- **In fact - let's take a moment - are you far off from God?** In a crowd of this size we should never assume that everyone is near to God.
  - Take a moment
  - "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." - Romans 5:8
  - If you are far off, Jesus is near! Today is the day of salvation!
  - Paul's personal story, how Jesus rescued him; gave him compassion for strangers in a city. He knew the condition of their hearts.

#### **(2) He discovers how the Gospel speaks into their cultural moment**

This is like a Cultural Fault-line. A Fault-line is the line between two land masses that sit alongside one another where built up potential energy can create an earthquake. A fault-line is sometimes a figure of speech to indicate a problem that may not be obvious and could cause something to fail.

A **cultural fault-line** are those places in culture where the problem may not be obvious, but it's a catastrophic place of failure. Cultural Fault-lines are the places where God can breakthrough into the hearts in the minds of the people in a way that they can comprehend and understand.

Another way to think about it is with this question: What aspect of the gospel is most desperately needed in that person's life? What aspect of the good news of Jesus will awaken that person to a new way of living!

Paul noticed in this case, a cultural fault-line was connected to their inability to know the name of God and to be able to worship him appropriately.

**He knew enough about the culture to identify how they needed to hear the Gospel.**

- He knew the poetry of the land and the form of their discourse
- He could think in the language of the culture of Athens
- He explained the Gospel in a way that they could understand
- He calls them to repent and turn toward God

Dallas Willard speaks of this concept of finding the cultural connection to Christ...and how close to the center Jesus can be in many areas of culture — which can become entry points for conversation:

“Yet today, from countless paintings, statues, and buildings, from literature and history, from personality and institution, from profanity, popular song, and entertainment media, from confession to controversy, from legend to ritual - Jesus stands quietly at the center of the contemporary world, as he himself predicted. He so graced the ugly instrument on which he died that the cross has become the most widely exhibited and recognized symbol on earth!” Dallas Willard, Divine Conspiracy

Jesus is never far off. We must help people find those connection points, where they are invited to call on the name of Jesus.

**(3) He moves toward people, as he imitates Christ.**

Synagogue >> Marketplace to Their Space - He accepts the invitation to speak on their turf. The Outcome in Athens was mixed reviews. Some sneered. Some said we want to hear more. A few believed. Two are named...

- Dionysius: a member of the Areopagus
- Damaris: a woman

Overall, it was relatively unfruitful. But there was fruit. Paul moves on to Corinth...where he will spend the next year and a half and plant a church.

**How do we begin practicing this idea of Moving toward their space?**

We're going to begin practicing this collectively...Serve Sunday

**Serve Sunday**

There was a reminder yesterday during the deacon retreat morning...we're coming out of an amazing season where we saw God move greatly...and now we're stepping out, locally, in a new concerted way. One of the deacons likened it to **taking the training wheels off**. We know how to ride a bike...with training wheels...but now we're learning to ride.

**Serve Sunday - May 29th**

- What it will look like? - A rallying spot
  - Doing church differently that day...less about coming to learn, and more about going to serve.
  - Key Projects for our Partners
  - Prayer Walks & Activities for Children to Get Involved
  - Looking for Champions (Building a team of champions - we'll sign you up to help planning)

- What we're not doing: Not doing this to make ourselves feel good, like we did our good deed for the year. That's when helping hurts.
- What we are doing...taking a baby step of motion. **Taking the Training Wheels Off. Learning to move as a group. The learning and lessons may will follow the day.**

**In the meantime, how can we prepare during this season of Consecration & Expectation?**

**(1) How can you better posture yourself as an observer that cares deeply?**

When was the last time you were brought to tears over our city? Or heartbroken at someone who was far from God?

- Many have written that culture of Athens had similarities to our culture - looking for the next new thing, the busyness of the city, and filled with brokenness.
- We become complacent, at times not even noticing the people in our common space, in our common world.
- We are so rushed in our movement...busy, picking up a prescription...not even looking up at the guy making our burrito behind the glass. In our own little world. Even our own little church culture.
- So consumed with what we are doing, that we forget to look up and see what's around us.

**Ask the Lord to give you an appropriate "distress" for the idolatry in our city.**

**(2) How can you begin discovering how the Gospel speaks those in your circle?**

I see a lot of the problems coming because the church is overly focused on "issues". We care less about peoples idolatry...and care too much about the cultural temperature...where the culture is headed. Instead of looking at the person and speaking into their lives and encouraging them or challenging them. We tend to talk about the issue, and drive the person away.

**Ask the Lord to give you a focus on people, not issues.**

**(3) How can you move toward people, in the pattern of Jesus, the imitation of Christ?**

When was the last time someone invited you to speak into their life?

When you speak about issues...to people tend to think of you as bird brain...just talking about one issue after another?

We can start our own 'marketplaces'. Our spheres of influence:

- PTA, Little League, Soccer Club, Library, YMCA, in your cooperation, through your small business, through your side hustle.
- Professional Organizations, School Administration
- Affinity groups and local coffee shops
- More than ever, especially in corporate America - isolation is on the rise. It's more and more difficult to find a place at the table.

How do we get to the place in people lives that they have ears to hear when we say — **"What you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you"**?

**Ask the Lord to give you opportunities to be invited in, and begin taking more opportunities to speak up on his behalf.**

**God Sends the Church Out // Benediction**