

# SEARCHING FOR THE UNKNOWN GOD

Dr. Fred Fourie ~ Sunday, June 24, 2007

*Remains of the Areopagus, Athens, Greece in our times.*



**Acts 17:16-29** While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “**What does this babbler want to say?**” Others said, “**He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.**” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took

him and brought him to the **Areopagus** and asked him, “**May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.**” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘**To an unknown god.**’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed 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 too are his offspring.’ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

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One really has to be in Athens and understand something about the history and importance of the Areopagus to experience the magnificence of the day when the Apostle Paul was brought there to be heard by the city leaders about the faith that he was proclaiming in the streets of Athens. Before the Romans conquered Greece, the Areopagus was the council of elders of the city, similar to the Roman Senate. Like the Senate, its membership was restricted to those who had held high public office. The Areopagus, like most city-state

institutions, continued to function in Roman times. The apostle made his way from Palestine and spoke to people in the streets until some philosophers were impressed enough with his message to decide that the city leaders should also hear and decide if his message was worthwhile. **Rejection from the city leaders would be a fatal blow to the message that Paul brought in the late first century after Christ.**

During the early seventies I visited Athens with a group of parishioners from South Africa. It was a Sunday Morning when we climbed to the top of the hill where today only the ruins of the Areopagus remains. I had prepared a mini sermon and announced that we would have our Sunday worship service up there. I was bravely going to stand where the Apostle once stood and preach from the spot from where the Apostle spoke. We arrived at the spot, and were so overcome by the significance of the place where we were standing and the overwhelming view over Athens from where we could still see the ruins of the ancient temples of the Greek gods. **This was the spot where the Gospel of Jesus Christ jumped the boundaries of Palestine and reached the highly cultured Greece before it reached Rome and finally the ends of the world.** Well, all of us, me included, were so overcome by the emotion of the moment that the mini sermon was never delivered. Yet, to this day all of us who were there that day still say that we felt so surrounded by the majesty and glory of God – that we marked that **event** as the highlight of our entire journey.

That day, 2000 years before ~ Paul was standing in the place where the famous Greek philosophers once stood to address the crowd. He began by telling the crowd how much he had enjoyed walking through their city. Paul complimented them, **"I see how extremely religious you are in every way."** Paul didn't condemn the Athenians for worshipping idols. He was smarter than that.

The Apostle Paul begins with a compliment, not a condemnation. He told them, he had seen an altar with the inscription, **"To an unknown god."** The Greeks believed in many gods. They had a god for every occasion. Just to cover all the bases they built this altar to "an unknown god" in case they had left any god out. Paul says, "I'd like to tell you about this unknown God." That's evangelism at its best!

That is still the heart of our Christian message amidst the idolatry and worship of images and things that do not really satisfy and are definitely not related to the true God. "I'd like to tell you about this unknown God."

In Christ Paul discovered the way to the heart of God and the wellspring of fulfillment in faith, something life-transforming, something real and satisfying and he wanted to share it.

Long ago, a certain man was gloriously converted one night, after hearing and understanding the Gospel for the first time. He began sharing the story of his conversion in churches throughout the area. During one of these sharing sessions someone suggested writing down the story of his conversion to prevent it from being lost. And so he did.

Years later someone asked him to tell the story of his conversion experience once more. **"Well,"** he replied, **"I have forgotten most of it, but I did write it down. Let me get it for you."** He turned to his granddaughter and said, **"Honey, please go to my desk and bring me the story of my conversion."** Later she returned with several sheets of yellowed, torn, and

tattered paper and said, "Grandpa, I hate to tell you this, but the roaches have gotten into your conversion experience."

There may be people listening right now, who have forgotten the very reasons and experiences why and when they accepted Christ as Lord and Savior.

Christianity has many people who no longer witness and talk about their faith, simply because the roaches of time have gotten into their faith. Christianity also has many people who cannot share their faith, simply because they followed the crowd and never, ever, reached a moment when they claimed Jesus Christ as their own, personal Savior!

For faith to make any difference in our lives it must first be our own. Faith isn't something we can borrow from our neighbors or parents or fellow churchgoers, or anyone else.

For Paul, sharing his faith was the most natural thing in the world, because he could never forget that day on the road to Damascus, when he met his Savior for the first time! "God," Paul said to the people of Athens, "is not far from each one of us." Then he quoted from a famous Greek poet that all the people were familiar with. "For in him we live and move and have our being." We believe that the God we were searching for came to us in and through Jesus Christ.

Then Paul gave his invitation. In Paul's words - so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him. Indeed God is not far from us. For 'In God we live and move and have our being'; Some of those who listened to Paul in Athens that day. heard and responded positively. Thus Christianity that originated in Palestine, spilled over in Greece and later to Rome and to the ends of the world.

Nothing is more appealing than a life that has been authentically touched by the Master's hand. Some of the Athenians saw that in Paul.

Do they also see that in us – in you and in me?

AMEN

