

# CONNECTING WITH CULTURE

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.



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Acts 17:16-34  
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*Acts 17:16-34*

Everyone has an opinion about God. When you ask people the question, “what is God like?” hardly anyone would answer, “I haven’t given it much thought.” Even the ones who don’t believe in God will have a pretty clear picture of what that God is like whom they don’t believe in.

There is a wide range of ideas about God. Some of them are probably true, or mostly true. Some of them are probably false, or mostly false. How do we connect with a culture that believes some true things and some untrue things? Do we have all the answers? Are we the only ones with answers?

Today we’re continuing our series in the book of Acts that we’ve called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. We’ve seen the church in Jerusalem form, face persecution, grow and expand.

Today we’re in the middle of what people refer to as the Second Missionary Journey. The apostle Paul takes this long trip throughout the ancient world. He started with the hopes of re-visiting some of the first churches that he planted, but soon God asked him to expand his territory and preach the Gospel in new places.

Today we’ll hear his famous sermon that he gives in the critical city of Athens. This message has been an inspiration for churches, missions efforts and whole Gospel movements. In a city like Athens, with so many different ideas circulating, we see an incredible example of Paul doing what we find so challenging. He presents the Gospel in a compelling way to a community with vastly divergent ideas of God.

This morning we’ll see the apostle Paul connecting with culture.

Connecting with culture is a very important topic for us. We live in a time of rapidly changing culture. What people were talking about yesterday, nobody will remember tomorrow. Ideas and trends and opinions shift so quickly all around us. Culture is changing at an unprecedented rate.

Add to that the fact that there are micro-cultures all around us as well. People congregate and huddle in like-minded groups that form little sub-cultures. It happens online. It happens in the workplace. It happens in churches. It’s almost as if everyone has their very own culture.

So how does the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the message of the creator of the universe—pierce all that instability and variety with a constant, unchanging picture of who God is? How does God connect with our culture? How do we explain God in the midst of so much confusion?

This question is important for us. We need to know in our lives how faith in Jesus interacts with our culture. It’s critical for the faith of others around us as well. Our passage this morning offers a brilliantly simple perspective on connecting the ideas in culture with the truth of who God is.

We will see how Paul affirms the ideas that people have while still acknowledging that they are incomplete. We will see a presentation of the Gospel that is culturally relevant, biblically accurate, and passionately presented. And we’ll see what kind of a response a message like this might have in a culture searching for answers.

## Wait and Watch

The story starts with Paul getting bored.

### Acts 17:16-21:

**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.)**

Paul is waiting around in Athens because he had left his companions back in the city of Berea when things got heated there. He is there by himself, so he finds something useful to do.

Paul wanders around the city observing. He waits, but he watches. He looks at what is true of the people. He asks questions, and he listens. But he isn't a distant observer, taking notes for his sociological research. The text says that he got emotional. His spirit within him was provoked.

Do you even see the people around you? When you're walking around the halls of your campus or your office or the store, do you even see the people you walk by? Can you tell what is going on for them? Do you recognize that these are people with the same kinds of concerns, questions, and emotions that you have?

It's so easy to walk right by. Not even notice. People are just there. With all the technology that we have to improve communication, it's never been easier to simply not see anyone at all.

Marina Abramovic is often referred to as Lady Gaga's best friend and the grandmother of performance art. In 2010, the Museum of Modern Art in New York hosted a retrospective of her work. It was the largest exhibition of performance art in the museum's history. As part of it, Abramovic performed a piece called *The Artist Is Present*. She sat at a rectangular table in a chair and invited strangers to sit across from her for as long as they like. They weren't allowed to talk. The goal was just to see each other.

Abramovic did this for nearly three months. 8-10 hours a day. Six days a week. People waited in lines for hours, sometimes overnight to participate. When they did, they had intense emotional reactions. They wept, laughed, were moved and confused. To simply be seen in our culture is revolutionary.

Paul saw people in Athens. He noticed what was going on. And the particular thing that he noticed was that it was a city full of idols. This observation is what caused an emotional reaction on his part: “the city was full of idols.”

Athens was a university city. It was full of people pursuing the highest level of education available to them. The people there liked to talk about things that most people would hardly understand. They felt themselves at the center of the world. They felt like big things were happening because of the radical ideas and innovations that spread out from their epicenter.

Sound familiar? Athens was a lot like Palo Alto in the Silicon Valley.

So there were a lot of things that Paul could have noticed about Athens. He could have been proud or impressed or amazed or excited or energized. Instead, his spirit was provoked because “the city was full of idols.”

What do you notice about our area? What provokes your spirit? Are you proud because we live in the technological capital of the world? Are you concerned for the busy life people are leading? Are you impressed by the wealth that drives down our streets every day? Are you addicted to the recreational opportunities?

What do you notice?

Do you see the innovation and excitement and achievement? Or do you see the brokenness and emptiness and vanity? Do you see the idols that our culture worships?

Paul watches and engages the culture around him. How can we do that? How can you watch and engage?

Paul begins to engage by going where he is most comfortable. He goes to the synagogue because he is a Jew. He goes to the marketplace because he is a tentmaker. He goes to those places that he is familiar with, and he starts to interact. This isn't him taking huge risks. These are the kinds of interactions that he knows how to have.

But this engagement leads to something. Some people make fun of him. But others are impressed. They realize that there is something different about this person who seems to notice the people around him while he speaks of something greater.

Some describe him as a “preacher of foreign divinities.” This description was a huge compliment. That’s a phrase that people used to accuse Socrates when he got in trouble during his day. Socrates was a hero of Greek philosophy. Paul noticed the people around him. And they noticed something special about him.

So people took him to the Areopagus—this was the court area of Athens. The Areopagus was where important matters were discussed and decided. Paul had said things that were significant enough to warrant him being taken there. People wanted to hear him out on this. What did he say? Why were the Athenians so interested?

I had the opportunity Friday night to hear the author and cultural critic Os Guinness speak. He made reference to an essay that he read when he was pursuing his doctorate on the topic of preaching that transforms communities. That paper listed three qualities that always seemed to be present. The first two could have been obvious: sound doctrine and effective presentation. But the third might have been a surprise: cultural diagnosis.

To present the message of God effectively to a culture, we have to understand and diagnose the issues of that culture. The Gospel is not a set of disembodied ideas. The Gospel is about the god-man who becomes incarnate to individual people living in their age.

Paul diagnosed the culture of Athens. This identification is what made his message resonate.

How would you diagnose our culture? Have you watched and engaged? Or are you so trapped in your own bubble that you hardly notice what is going on around you?

The opportunities to engage are there. You just have to be looking for them. Where are the synagogues and marketplaces of your life? Where are those places that you are already comfortable? The places you already spend time? Maybe as a chaperone on a field trip with your kids? Late nights in the dorms when everyone is procrastinating? Happy hours after work?

Find those places and begin by watching. Listen to others. Learn about them. Notice what is true for them. Allow your spirit to be provoked. Then you can engage. Bring up the big topics. See where it leads. Everyone wants to go deep, but no one is willing to lead the conversation there. Watch, learn, listen, and engage.

## Connect and Correct

Paul began by simply being observant and engaged with the culture around him. He was “out there.”

But then he speaks. He launches into one of the most brilliant sermons in the book of Acts.

**Acts 17:22-28:**

**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.’**

Paul’s words here are full of rich theology. He is addressing a culture that is in love with ideas. These people want to talk philosophy. Paul gives them a feast.

He begins by affirming them. Calling them religious is a compliment to them. Paul draws on the time that he spent engaging with their culture by referencing this altar “to the unknown God.” From that starting point, he gives them a lot of true things about God.

Paul says that God is a creator who made everything. God exists everywhere—he is omnipresent. God has no needs. He is the source of life. He is sovereign Lord over everything up there and down here. He is the one who determines the reigns of nations and cultures. But he is not only powerful and impressive. He yearns for people to seek him and find him. He is relational. He isn’t as far as away as his power might make him seem. We, as his creation, are connected to him intimately. We come from him.

In one paragraph, Paul said what the systematic theology books on the shelves in my office unpack in several volumes. These are beautiful, rich, deep truths about God.

But the incredible thing is that all of these truths are ideas that the Athenians already believe. Paul is making reference in almost every phrase to some of the core values of their own culture. The Stoics and Epicureans thought temples were stupid because a god would never constrain himself to a single place. They thought sacrifices were unnecessary because a god would never need anything from people. They were convinced that the great diversity of cultures came from one central god. They believed people had an obligation to seek out that god to find him.

Paul even quotes their poets. Both Epimenides, a Cretan poet from 600 BC and Areus, a Sicilian poet from 300 BC were writing about Zeus. Paul takes those ideas and applies them to the God of Israel. This approach is a radical strategy. It may even strike us as dangerous. What if he goes too far affirming their ideas? Isn't that somewhat confusing?

Paul begins by connecting with the culture. How can we connect with culture?

Our culture worships many gods. We might be tempted to begin by criticizing all the false gods that drive so much of the frenetic activity around us. But what if they aren't false gods? What if some of them are unknown gods? What if some of the things that people worship around here are true and good and right, but they just don't know where they come from?

A longing for intimate relationship. The desire to make an impact in the world. A sense that all people should be treated equally. Wanting to be connected to something eternal. The insistence that we can make our own decisions. A commitment to justice for the vulnerable. A stubborn belief in the almost inexhaustible creativity of the human spirit to innovate.

Aren't these the unknown gods of our culture? The ideas that people hold sacred. The values that define how people view themselves, how they understand their work, what it means to be successful and happy.

But when you explore these ideas, you find out that they all came from deep within the heart of the God of the Bible. You don't arrive at those things through humanism or secularism or pluralism. The Gospel of Jesus is what gives birth to freedom, justice, equality, intimacy and purpose.

There is nothing behind the curtain of the gods in our culture. They are worshipped passionately and fervently. But people don't know what they are worshipping. They don't know that behind those things that they hold dear is the person of Jesus!

We don't have to start with what is wrong with our culture. We can start engaging with culture in the same way that Paul engaged with Athens. We can say, "what therefore you worship as unknown, I proclaim to you." Let me show you where some of the values that you hold most dear come from. Let me reveal to you the source of the things that you think are important in life. Let me show you the real identity of the unknown gods that you worship.

The people around us are very religious. Not in the traditional way. But they are religiously devoted to their ideals. After we've watched and engaged, we can connect with our culture by affirming those things.

However, we don't stop there. Paul didn't.

**Acts 17:29-31:**

**"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."**

In the same way that the first part of Paul's message consistently affirms the ideas of Athens, these words consistently challenge them.

Paul says that God is not an image, but that's exactly how they thought of him. Paul says that God has overlooked ignorance, but the philosophers of Athens would consider themselves to be anything but ignorant. Paul says that God calls people to repent because of impending judgment. God is out there. He is waiting to be found. But he would never come down to us. And who would dare to judge the brilliant minds that come out of the schools of Athens?

The final challenge comes when Paul says that God proved himself by raising his judge from the dead. Now he has completely lost them. God is about ideas and values. He is a creator and a font of wisdom. God doesn't

involve himself in the things of earth. And he certainly doesn't do silly magic like raising people from the dead. Miracles are for the unenlightened and unsophisticated. We know better. Don't be ridiculous.

Paul isn't afraid to connect with the culture in Athens. He affirms way more than most of us would be comfortable affirming. But he also isn't afraid to correct. He says things that he knows will turn them off. He invites them into something truer and fuller and richer than what they came up with on their own.

We have to be willing to connect with our culture, but we also have to be willing to correct our culture. How can we do this?

We need to be willing to talk about things that the people around us feel are silly—things like eternity and the return of Jesus to earth; sexual boundaries that limit our expression of God-given sexuality to the intention of marriage between a man and a woman; the real presence of God in history, moving through the flawed church and broken people; truth that transcends culture and ethnicity, that is true for all people everywhere; a Savior who describes himself as the only way to know God, not one path among many.

Paul is willing to suggest that the people around him have a lot of things right. But they still need to change. They can't continue as they are. He invites them to turn and repent. The focus of his invitation is on repentance.

We might think about repentance as being sorry. But that isn't a good summary. The origin of the Greek word used has to do with "changing your mind." Repentance is a turning from what you used to think to embrace something that is truer. Sorrow is involved, but 2 Corinthians 7:10 says that "godly grief leads to repentance." The sorrow of regret leads to a transformation.

Paul invites the Athenians to change their minds about the things they have wrong and embrace a new way of life. Affirm the truth and lay aside the falsehood. Repentance is about embracing a new way of living.

Most of the people that I know outside of the church don't want God to tell them that they need to repent. But the curious thing is that people in our culture are very willing to listen to people who tell them how they need to change their lives.

Think about TED talks and documentaries and self-help seminars. There is an entire industry built around people telling you that you think about things the wrong way and you need to change everything to live a better life. Maybe it's the factory farming of cattle, or the conditions of iPhone factories in China, or the unfair economics of coffee in South America, or the evil marketing ploys of the fast food industry.

People will pay money to listen to someone tell them that they don't have all the information, they need to understand how things really are, and they need to fundamentally change the way they live to experience a fuller life for them or someone else.

So why don't they want to hear it from God? Why does a god who wants them to repent and turn from sin in order to experience life to the full, even life eternal, turn them off?

It might be the issue of control. If I eat fair trade chocolate and only buy organic and cook my own food and boycott Apple Computer, then I can control things. I can do what is necessary to make sure I can't be judged.

The idea of a god who will judge me, a god whom I can't control, judgment that is out of my hands... that might be too much.

But if it's true, then people need to hear it. They need to encounter this message: that the source of their unknown gods wants to love them. He wants to forgive them and bless them and release them. But he can't do it unless they turn from sin and self-centeredness and rebellion. It begins with repentance.

What amazes me about the apostle in this sermon is that he is willing to go further in both extremes than most of us are comfortable. Paul is more affirming than we think is appropriate. And he is more corrective than we are comfortable being. He is willing to connect in radical ways and correct in radical ways.

We've seen the apostle do this brilliant dance of connecting and correcting. He manages to balance both. But we tend to emphasize one over the other. Pay attention to what you were feeling as I was describing what Paul did. Some of you were cheering him on while I was talking about connecting. You were thinking that this is what you think is important and finally someone is saying it.

Others of you were cheering Paul on when we saw him correcting culture. You were thinking that finally, someone is laying it down. People need to know that repentance is necessary. We can't be afraid to tell them because that is what preaching the Gospel is all about.

Here's the catch. If you were cheering on the connecting part, you probably need to listen to the correcting part. If you were cheering on the correcting part, you probably need to listen to the connecting part. You're probably somewhere on this spectrum. If you like connecting, how can you stretch yourself to correct? If you like correcting, how you can stretch yourself to connect?

## Expect a Mixed Response

Paul waits around in Athens. While he's waiting, he watches the culture around him. Then he engages with it, starting with the places where he is most comfortable. Once Paul is given the opportunity, he connects with the culture, affirming the true things about God that they believe. Then he corrects them, inviting to something deeper than what they have known before.

This is a brilliant sermon. It is literally text-book. This is the textbook for preaching in a way that engages with culture, which leads us to the final surprise of this story. You would expect that a brilliant sermon preached specifically to a unique culture would be fabulously successful.

**Acts 17:32-34:**

**When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.**

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

How did people respond to this brilliant sermon? Some mocked. Some weren't sure. Some believed.

This beautifully crafted, culturally relevant, theologically accurate sermon met with...a mixed response. Some mocked. Some weren't sure. Some believed.

These are the three options for the ways that we might be received as we try to connect with our culture. Some will agree. Some will be intrigued. And some will mock us.

Even when we are brilliant; even when we get it right; even when we follow the textbook to the letter we can expect a mixed response.

Whenever we try to connect with our culture and apply the truth of God to a changing world, the best we can hope for is a mixed response. And for many of us, that's a very scary truth. In fact, I think this is one of the things that holds us back from trying to connect with culture.

We like predictability. In school, we learned that if you do it the right way, you will get a good grade. If you follow the rules, you won't get into trouble. We are experts at learning a system and following it. And we expect that if we do that, things will turn out the way we want it to.

We certainly don't expect to get it right and be mocked in response. We want to know how things will turn out. And it drives us crazy that the Gospel doesn't work that way. God doesn't work that way. In fact, it's part of the glory of the Gospel that God offers life freely to anyone who would accept it. And he allows people to turn it down. He allows people to mock him and disbelieve and misunderstand and walk away.

Are you willing to be mocked? Are you willing for someone to look at you with that look in their eyes that says, "Oh, you're one of those religious types. I thought I had respect for you, but I guess I was wrong. I thought you were mature and sophisticated. I had no idea you believed in Jesus."

The proclamation of the Gospel is not a recipe for success. It's an invitation for response. Invitations are vulnerable. They leave us open to rejection and humiliation as well as acceptance and appreciation. It leaves us vulnerable to be accepted or rejected. Just like God leaves himself vulnerable to those things.

Are you willing to open yourself up? Because if you aren't, then you'll never connect with culture. If you aren't willing to be mocked, then you aren't willing to be honest.

When we arrive at this place where we understand that we have to expect a mixed response, the result is that we find a new kind of freedom. When people are confused or angry or mock us, it doesn't mean that we got it wrong. If we can get over ourselves and our fear of being misunderstood, then we can freely represent God in the knowledge that even the best presentation will receive a mixed response.

Do your best. And expect a mixed response.

## **Conclusion**

Think back to some of those ways that people think about God. Some of them were true. Some were false.

Think about the people you know. The people you work with and live with and socialize with and go to school with. How can you listen to them so that you really see them? How can you affirm what they think about God? How can you help them to see what is behind their unknown gods? How can you correct the misconceptions they have and invite them into a changed life of following Jesus?

And what will you do if they mock you after you've done all these things?

You'll be hurt. So you'll come back to God. You'll come back to home base. And you'll try again, because we want people to know Jesus. We don't want people to worship in ignorance or follow after gods that they don't understand. We want people to know the full life that comes from trusting in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Look around. Pay attention. Connect with the culture that you live in. What our world worships as unknown, this we proclaim. Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the god that we seek after. Find him and live.