

Main Idea: Taking the gospel to Athens involves two essentials, as demonstrated by Paul in Athens in Acts 17:16-34.

- I. Taking the gospel to Athens requires contact (16-21).
 - A. We must see the lost (16).
 - B. We must go to where the lost are (17).
 - C. We must be ready for further opportunities (18-21).
- II. Taking the gospel to Athens requires communication (22-34).
 - A. Prepare the soil (22-23).
 1. Establish common ground.
 2. Find a point of contact.
 - B. Plant the seed (24-28).
 1. Tell them who God is (24-25).
 2. Tell them what God did (26).
 3. Tell them what God desires (27-28).
 - C. Pick the weeds (29-31).
 1. People need to repent (29-30).
 2. People need to know the truth about Jesus (31).
 - D. Praise God for the harvest (32-34).
 1. Some will mock.
 2. Some will want to hear more.
 3. Some will believe.

Affirming the Bottom Line: How many roads lead to heaven?

1. There is one God.
2. There is one Savior.
3. There is one way.

The Lord is at work through His church taking the gospel to the world. That’s what we are seeing as we journey through the book of Acts. He starts in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, then come the nations. In today’s text we see the gospel going to Athens. Athens is different from Jerusalem. Athens is different from Philippi and Thessalonica. How do you make Christ known in Athens, is a vital question for us as we seek to fulfill our mission in our pluralistic world.

Athens believes there are many ways to heaven. The gospel says there is one way. How then do you make the gospel known in Athens? Let’s find out.

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:16-23

All roads lead to heaven. All roads are legitimate roads. You have no right to say your road is any better than mine, nor do I concerning yours. It is the mark of civilized society to recognize the validity of different beliefs. The important thing is that you believe that your road will take you where you want to go. That is, of course, unless you believe that there is no road out of this world, and if you do, that too is a valid belief simply because you have chosen to believe it.

That, my friends, is *pluralism*, and it’s the air that we are breathing in this 21st century world. You say, “But it sounds absurd to suggest that you can take *any* road and end up at the same location.”

It is absurd, and even the pluralist doesn’t follow his own thesis in real life. When he takes a vacation from Ohio to Florida, he takes Interstate 75 or 77, and not Interstate 70, because an east-west road doesn’t take you south, no matter how hard you *believe* it will.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

When the pluralist takes a trip to Florida, he follows the map. But when he plans his trip to heaven, he writes his own map and doesn't see the inconsistency.

Now I don't believe the tenets of pluralism, nor do most of you, I assume. But the question before us is, how do we present Christ to a world that believes there are many ways to God? That is our task. Our mission is to take the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ to an inclusive-minded world.

"I am *the way, the truth, and the life*," Jesus said. "No one comes to the Father but by me (John 14:6)." But the world doesn't believe that. Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Maharishi Yogi. To the pluralist, these are all viable roads on the journey to heaven. Oh, maybe one is a more direct shot, but they'll all get you there in time.

Where do you begin in evangelizing people who think like that? That's certainly not a new dilemma for Jesus-followers, for the church has confronted pluralism down through the centuries, indeed it began in the first century.

In Acts 17 the apostle Paul confronted what in essence is the twin sister of the pluralism, which is *polytheism*, or the worship of many gods. Pluralism says there are many ways to God. Polytheism just says there are many gods—take your pick. Certainly the apostle ran into this divergent way of thinking wherever he went in the Roman Empire, but it was in Athens that he faced it in its most potent form.

Taking the gospel to Athens involves two essentials. Paul demonstrates both in Acts 17:16-34.

I. Taking the gospel to Athens requires contact (16-21).

There is no impact without *contact*, personal contact. For Paul the contact began in verse 16, "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols."

Paul is in the middle of his second missionary journey which started when he and Silas left Antioch. After traveling westward across what is modern day Turkey, they broke new ground in what is Europe today. They preached in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, and were run out of town each time. Such is the offensive nature of the gospel. When Paul was forced to leave Berea, he left Silas and Timothy behind and headed 200 miles to the south for his new God-given assignment in Athens. According to verse 15 he left his teammates with instructions to join him as soon as possible.

But he didn't wait for their arrival to begin his next ministry. Luke says that upon arrival in Athens, something stirred his spirit. What was it? He saw a city full of idols. And what he saw moved him into action.

I think most of us can relate. We love Jesus, and we see the idolatry all around us. It disturbs us. But what can we do about it?

Paul shows us by modeling three responsibilities.

A. We must see the lost (16). When Paul arrived in Athens, he saw quite a city. Athens was the center of Greek culture. There was a time when Athens was the greatest city in the world. Socrates, his famous student Plato, and his renowned student Aristotle all taught there. So did Epicurus, founder of Epicureanism, and Zeno, founder of Stoicism, two important philosophers we'll meet in the text shortly.

By Paul's day the city was a couple of centuries past its prime. Corinth had bypassed it in terms of political and commercial significance in Greece. But don't get the idea that first century Athens was washed up. Even then, culturally and philosophically, Athens

was still dominant. It housed the world's most famous university and attracted just about every religion in the world of that day. Statues of gods filled the city, and every public building was dedicated to a god. In fact, there was so much religion there that the pagan writer Petronius sarcastically said it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man.¹ According to Kent Hughes, there were probably only about 10,000 people living there when Paul walked its streets, but there were 30,000 statues of gods!²

To this day if you travel to Athens you can see the physical beauty of the ancient temples, the sculptures, the monuments, and other artifacts. And then there's the magnificent Parthenon. It was all there in its glorious grandeur when Paul arrived.³

But it wasn't the beauty of Athens that struck Paul—he doesn't even mention the it. Did he see it? Indeed, but not a word about it. What was it that caught his eye?

The *idols*. And he didn't merely *see* the idols. He was *distressed* by them (NIV), "provoked" in the ESV. That may not be a strong enough word for the Greek *paroxuno* which means "to become angry, or infuriated." Luke used the noun form to describe the "sharp disagreement" between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:39. Swindoll suggests, "Paul was about as at home in Athens as a bust of Luther would be in the Vatican."⁴

Paul saw the idolatry and it *incensed* him. Why? Because he knew there is only one true God. If people are worshiping idols it means they are not worshiping the true God, and that's grievous for two reasons. First, those who worship false gods will perish eternally. But more significantly, those who worship false gods are robbing God of the worship *He* deserves.

It's the latter reason that provides us with the greatest motivation for missions. Why must we send our best to reach the lost, send our people, our money, our prayer support? Yes, it will be good for the lost, but the fundamental reason is that *God deserves worship that He is not receiving*.

Let that sink in. Look at the world from God's perspective, for He sees a world that is full of people that He created in His image and for His praise who are failing to worship Him, choosing instead to worship cheap substitutes.

Jesus said in John 4:23-24, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of *worshipers the Father seeks*. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Dear friends, this is what motivated Paul, the conviction that God is worthy of worship He is not presently receiving.

Does that grip you? What do we see when we drive through this community? Do we see the potential for true worshipers? That's what God sees, and seeks.

Here's where contact begins. We must see the lost.

B. We must go to where the lost are (17). "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there."

What do lost people need? That's a tough question. You could make a point that they need many things. But what do they need *most*? According to God's chosen

¹ MacArthur, p. 129.

² Kent Hughes, p. 230.

³ See LaSor, pp. 269-70.

⁴ Charles Swindoll, *Paul*, p. 204.

servant, they need to hear the truth. And that's what Paul gave them. He "reasoned" with them. And he didn't wait for them to come to him, but went to where they were.

Luke mentions three places where Paul evangelized in Athens. He went first to the synagogue, then to the marketplace, and eventually to the Areopagus (19), a public meeting place for religious debate. This says something important to us, namely, that we're not going to reach all the lost in the same way. Paul didn't use just one method, nor should we. We must go where the lost are, *wherever* they are.

There are some unsaved people who will come to church with us if we'd invite them, so we should. There are others who won't darken the door of a church, for various reasons. But they might come to our house for a Bible study, if we'd ask them.

As a child I remember a lady coming to our neighborhood to tell Bible stories to the area children. It was my first clear exposure to the gospel, at least that I recall.

There are lots of ways to present the gospel to lost people, but none of them work without this. We, like Paul, must go to where the lost are. Across the street, in the next town, around the world, wherever.

C. We must be ready for further opportunities (18-21). Watch what happened next to Paul in verse 18, "A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler 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."

Athens hosted several schools of philosophy. Paul actually evangelized individuals from two rival groups, the Epicureans and the Stoics. You've probably heard of the Stoics before. A Stoic takes the stiff-upper-lip, grin-and-bear-it approach to life. Stoics taught that a man should accept the laws of nature, no matter how harsh they are. The Stoics emphasized human self-sufficiency and intellect. "Deny your emotions," they taught. "Live life based on reason. Strive for self-mastery."

In many ways the Epicureans took the opposite approach. They taught that happiness and pleasure were the highest good. "Eat, drink, and be merry" would be a classic bit of Epicurean counsel. There is no afterlife. So since we're going to die like animals anyway, we might as well live it up now.

Wiersbe observes, "The Epicureans said, 'Enjoy life!' and the Stoics said, 'Endure life!' but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God's risen Son."⁵

It's no wonder some of the people Paul evangelized accused him of being a "babbling," a word which is literally "seed picker." Originally the term referred to birds picking up grain and seeds, but eventually the Greeks used it to refer to someone who peddled others' ideas without understanding them, kind of a philosophical plagiarist, or as Hughes puts it, "a chirping gutter sparrow who went around peeping borrowed ideas!"⁶

When we share the gospel, it produces a couple of baseline effects. First, it turns some people off, for the Word of God is foolishness to the natural mind. They laugh. They ridicule. They want the conversation to stop. But secondly, in God's timing, it opens up further opportunities for proclaiming this wonderful gospel we love.

Paul saw both effects of his ministry. Notice verses 19-21: "Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, 'May we know what

⁵ Warren Wiersbe, p. 472.

⁶ Kent Hughes, p. 231.

this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.’ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)”

Some ridiculed Paul. But others, confused by his “strange ideas,” wanted to hear more and invited him to come to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was a court named for a hill outside of Athens where it once met. The term means “hill of Ares,” Ares being the Greek god of thunder and war (the Roman equivalent was Mars, hence, it’s called “Mars Hill” in the KJV of verse 22).

Interestingly, this was the court that condemned Socrates centuries earlier. It shows that our great God can open up big doors of opportunity when He so chooses. We just need to be faithful and ready.

But here’s where it starts, brothers and sisters. If we are going to reach lost people in Athens, it takes *contact*. We must go. We must reach out to the lost. They’re there. Paul found some of them are at the synagogue, others in the marketplace, still others at the lecture hall. We’ll find them at work, at school, in our neighborhoods, on the ball fields. And if we want God to use us, we must make contact.

And when possible, we do it together. Evangelism is a team effort. Not everybody can do apologetics like an apostle Paul. But even Paul, when possible, worked with a team.

Several years ago a couple started coming to our church, heard the gospel, and were so encouraged by the Word that they invited some of their friends to their house and asked Sherry and me to come and share with them. One of their friends, a believer, was a chef, and he’d fix wonderful meals for the group. So the people would come for pheasant under glass, and then we’d get out our Bibles and study Jesus’ sermon on the mount. It was a team effort, and it was a joy.

Some of you who are new to the faith have all kinds of unsaved friends. Why not invite them to your house, and invite someone from your church family to come too, and share with the group about the person who is transforming your life?

II. Taking the gospel to Athens requires communication (22-34).

When I was a freshman in college, I participated on an evangelism team that went weekly to another college campus to talk with people about their need for Christ. Now that was a stretching experience, but I learned from it. One lesson was that mere contact doesn’t save anybody. If all we do is build relationships with lost people but never open our mouths and speak the gospel truth, we’ve come short of the goal. Faith comes by *hearing* the Word.

We can learn much from Paul’s example about how to present the gospel to pagan, even pluralistic thinking people. In His parables Jesus taught that witnessing to unsaved people is like farming. I’ve chosen to use the farming analogy to summarize Paul’s approach in Athens, four steps we must take in communicating with the lost.

A. Prepare the soil (22-23). “Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 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. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

Before we can plant seed and certainly before we harvest a crop we must *prepare the soil*. How is that done in evangelism? Paul demonstrated two ways right here.

1. *Establish common ground*. “I see you are very religious,” Paul began. Notice, he’s just sharing his perception with them, what he *sees*. And he didn’t say they were right with God, just “religious.” There’s a world of difference, of course, though they don’t know it yet, but he does, and it’s a point he will soon make.

2. *Find a point of contact*. Paul told his hearers he had walked around their city. That shows he took interest in them, in what mattered to them. He took steps to get into their world in order to get to know them.

You can tell a lot about people simply by *looking*. If your unsaved neighbor is a gardener, it would wise to take interest in gardening. If your unsaved classmate is into sports, take an interest. Ask him about his garden or game. Break the ice.

Now a word of caution. We mustn’t see our neighbors as evangelistic projects, but as people who matter to God and should matter to us. Remember? The Father is seeking true worshippers. And we are His ambassadors, so we are seeking to establish relationships with them, motivated by the desire to see them have a saving relationship with Him.

In Athens Paul began with the familiar and then moved to the unfamiliar. That’s vital in evangelism. Build bridges.

For years Billy Graham followed this principle. Before conducting a crusade in a city, he studied the city. Often he met with the mayor and other local leaders. He got to know the media outlets, the sports teams in the city, and other notable features of the area. Why? Because when he would speak he wanted to talk about the familiar before he moved to biblical truth that might be very unfamiliar to many.⁷

So let’s look. Now as we look, look specifically for a point of contact. What was it for Paul? As he looked he found altars, thousands of them, one altar that read, “To An Unknown God.” That became his point of contact, his bridge to God’s Word.

Romans 2:15 says God has written His law on the human heart of even unregenerate people. Your unsaved work associate has a conscience. He may ignore it but it whispers (sometimes it shouts) when he violates God’s law. For instance, in the first commandment God says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” When a man lives for his job, he’s breaking God’s law. When a woman lives for her kids, she’s violating God’s Law. Both have created rival gods.

This is vital for us to see. The violation of God’s Law becomes a point of contact for sharing the gospel, and we must look for such contact points. For Paul, it was an idol. What might we see? Here are some examples.

Your neighbors are having marriage trouble. What’s their problem? Bottom line, one or both of them is violating God’s law. They probably don’t even know it. They likely think the problem is horizontal. It’s the other person. But their fundamental problem is vertical. It’s a God problem. They don’t know God or are living in violation of God’s law. That’s why their marriage is in trouble. They are not living life God’s way and they need God.

Another example. Your teenage friend is abusing his body with body carving. Why does he do it? He calls it self-expression. What he is doing is expressing his core belief that life is meaningless. Since that’s true, I might as well make my own meaning out of

⁷ I am indebted to Charles Swindoll’s observation at this point, p. 209.

life. What is that? That's the violation of God's second commandment, idolatry, to worship the god I want instead of the God who is, and to worship Him *my* way instead of *His*. His way includes respect for creation, including my body, to care for it so as to bring attention to *Him*. But my way is to deviate, to destroy, all for the purpose of bringing attention to *me*.

If a person violates God's law over and over, what happens to their conscience? It becomes calloused. But as I share God's Word with them, the Spirit uses the Word to begin to peel away the calloused layers from that conscience, which results in conviction and an awareness of guilt and ultimately, a need for the Savior.

Be assured that Paul isn't commending the Athenians for this altar to the unknown god. He isn't agreeing with their religious system that says there are many gods. He's simply found a touch-point in their lives from which to build a bridge to take them to the gospel. There is an *unknown God* to them, and they are about to hear who He is.

In communicating with lost people, step #1 is to prepare the soil.

B. Plant the seed (24-28). It would be helpful to explore Paul's message in great detail, but for this study I want to see the big ideas. In essence, in his gospel presentation in Athens, Paul puts the spotlight on God and tells his audience three things about the God they do not know. We must do the same as we interact with people today.

1. *Tell them who God is (24-25).* "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 hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

In order to be right with God, people need to know *who God is*. In simple, straightforward language, Paul told his polytheistic audience some shocking truth. The God you don't know is the Creator of all. He is also the *Kurios*, the Lord of all. And guess what? He doesn't live in manmade objects (sorry about all this beautiful architecture). The fact is, God needs nothing from us. The opposite is true. We need Him. He gave us everything, and that means we are accountable to Him.

These would be shocking words for an Athenian. *God made the world and everything in it*. That went against Epicurean teaching which said that matter is eternal and had no creator, and against the Stoics who in essence were pantheists, believing that everything was part of God.

So how do we do evangelism in a pagan society? Just like this. We must start by telling people who God is, namely, the Creator. In situations when Paul shared the gospel with Jews, he could assume this truth, but not with Gentiles. Their minds were filled with false ideas about God and the origin of the universe.

It's no different for us, is it? Nearly everyone we know has been indoctrinated by a theory called evolution for decades now, so much so that before we can tell people about God's salvation, we must inform them about *God*, chiefly that God is the *Creator*.

2. *Tell them what God did (26).* "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."

What did God do? He created one man. That statement flatly contradicts the evolutionary notion that man came into being through random processes. No, says the evangelist, God created one man.

Then from that one man He formed the nations. Every nation comes from that first man, which means there is only one race, right? Yes, the *human* race. And this means that racism is ludicrous, for if there's only one race, then hating someone whose skin color differs from mine is essentially self-hatred.

Furthermore, the Creator God determines the time and place of every nation. Think about the Philistines ten centuries BC. Think about the Babylonian empire six centuries BC, and the Roman Empire. And think about the last two thousand years, with the Mayan civilization, and Spain, and Nazi Germany, and communist China, and the United States. Why did they come to power, and why did (or will they eventually) lost their power? It's because of God, who, as the ESV puts it, He "determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place."

So the Creator God is a *sovereign God*. He formed mankind, and He forms nations.

Again, please think about how radical these words sounded to the audience in Athens. The missionary was confronting the core of their false belief system.

LaSor is right, "Paul is undercutting the pagan doctrines of polytheism (many gods) and atheism (no gods). He is stabbing at the heart of Athenian pride and Greek racial superiority. He is putting God at the center of the universe, in place of man's wisdom."⁸

When we do evangelism, a cookie-cutter approach won't do. We must know who we're talking to, and what they think about God, or don't think but need to think.

3. *Tell them what God desires (27-28)*. "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

So what does God desire? He doesn't want the people He has created to ignore Him. He wants them to seek and reach out for Him.

That's why we are here on this planet. *For Him*. He doesn't exist for us. We exist for Him. To support this point Paul actually quotes from some secular Greek literature, the first quotation taken from the Cretan poet Epimenides (600 BC) and the second from the Cilician poet Aratus (3rd century BC).⁹

Paul used an interesting word picture here when he talked about "reaching out" and "finding." The Greek poet Homer used this language in the well known story of Cyclops, as Boice explains:

"The giant one-eyed Cyclops had captured Odysseus and his men, and Odysseus had gotten him drunk and then blinded him with a sharp stake. The epic's hero then wanted to sneak out of the cave where he and his men were being held. But it was difficult because Cyclops was groping around, feeling after Odysseus so that he might find him and kill him. That is the very word Paul uses. So it is as if he is saying: In our sin we are as blind as the blinded Cyclops. Nevertheless, because creation is still there, we have an obligation to feel after God and find him, even though we cannot see him."¹⁰

Paul didn't quote these poets because he agreed with everything they said. He didn't. But he knew that because of God's common grace even unregenerate men can say true things. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.

⁸ LaSor, p. 273.

⁹ Paul didn't quote these poets to suggest he agreed with everything they said, but for added support.

¹⁰ James Boice, *Acts*, p. 299.

The true God isn't far from you. Your own poets knew that. You don't have to work your way to the Creator. Yes, He's great, but He's also near, very near, so near in fact that you can come to know Him today!

And so we prepare the soil. Then we plant the seed. Step #3 might surprise you.

C. Pick the weeds (29-31). I had a garden once when I was about 13. I wanted to see if I could raise some produce. So I worked the soil and planted the seed. Do you know what happened? I ignored the third step. I didn't eliminate the weeds, and the weeds ruined the effectiveness of the good seed.

This happens when we do evangelism, too. It's vital that we tell people the truth about God. That's what planting the seed is all about. But we must also pick the weeds. That is, we must let the hearer know there are some things that have to go if the seed is going to produce a harvest.

And so, after telling them who God is, what God did, and what God desires, we must also tell them what God *requires*. According to Paul, God requires two things.

1. *People need to repent (29-30).* That's the key word in Paul's final point. "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 man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to **repent**."

It's significant that Paul didn't confront the immorality of the Athenians, though they were very immoral. Nor did he rebuke their intellectual pride, though they likewise were guilty of that. Instead, he called for repentance in the area which under-girded their immorality and arrogance, that is, their refusal to acknowledge the existence of the Creator God and the evidence for Him as seen in creation.

In Romans 1:18-20 Paul elaborated on this, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

Let there be no misunderstanding. What does God require people to do? They must reject the worship of false, man-made gods, and for that matter, reject the worship of the true God in false ways. If they are doing either, they must stop. They must repent.

And God is serious about this, Paul told the assembly in Athens. In the past He overlooked such ignorance, not that He excused it, but that He didn't carry out His just sentence against those who did it. But He's going to. That day of judgment is at hand, and so now He commands people to repent.

Why? Verse 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 all men by raising him from the dead."

Paul now reaches the climax of his message. People need two things, first, to *repent*.

2. *People need to know the truth about Jesus (31).* And not simply the watered-down version so many today know. The true Jesus, the One (as Paul puts it) that God appointed to be the judge of the world, whose authority God Himself verified by raising Him from the dead.

So what have we learned thus far from Paul about doing evangelism in Athens? We've learned that having made contact, we confront sin, call for repentance, and urge

people to believe in Jesus, the One God sent into the world, who died, rose again, and who will judge the world.

Now answer this. Does this message sound like Peter's in Acts 2? Yes and no. Yes, in that he eventually calls on people to repent and believe in Christ. But on the other hand, no, in that Peter starts his message by going to the prophet Joel, whereas Paul goes back to creation. Peter could assume what Paul couldn't. People were different in Athens, as they are today in Wheelersburg.

When I was a teenager a popular gospel presentation went like this... "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. That's why He sent His Son to die for you. Accept Jesus and God will save you."

We can debate whether that's a good message to preach in Jerusalem, but it's certainly not suitable for Athens, or for most in Wheelersburg. Why not? It misses the crucial point, doesn't it? If God loves me so much, why do I need a Savior?

Paul didn't begin with God's love. Paul began with God's greatness. God is the Creator, and as such desires and deserves something from you that you are not giving Him. Indeed, He doesn't see you as the good person you think you are, but as a rebel in His world. You've gone your own way. You have failed to seek Him, and that displeases Him greatly. He's been patient with you until now, but His patience has a limit. It's time to repent. It's time to get right with Him by turning to His Son, Jesus Christ, the One who is going to judge the world at a day soon to come, the only One who can save You from your sins.

Think about how that message struck the Epicureans in the audience. "Repent? who, me? You're telling me I am going to give an account to some judge for my actions?" That certainly didn't sit well with his "Eat, drink, and be merry" approach to life. Nor will it with the modern day Epicureans with whom we rub shoulders.

But that's part of our task in evangelism, to prepare the soil, plant the seed, and then extend a call to repentance, that is, *pick the weeds*. Then comes the fourth step...

D. Praise God for the harvest (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.' At that, Paul left the Council. A few men 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."

When it comes to reaching lost people in a pagan society, of this we can be sure. If we proclaim the gospel clearly, there will likely be three responses, as seen in Athens.

1. *Some will mock.* They "sneered." The resurrection makes no sense to unregenerate minds.

2. *Some will want to hear more.* They said so to Paul, too. "We want to hear you again on this subject." It takes time to process truth. The preacher must not pick green fruit, but give lost people time and more explanation of biblical truth. And then...

3. *Some will believe.* "A few believed," Luke says.

Most feel that Paul spent only a few weeks in Athens. We're not told that he established a church. Some even feel he left as a failure. They say that his determination to preach the cross only in the next city he went to, Corinth, implies he took a wrong approach in Athens, that he used too much human wisdom trying to establish common ground with the Athenians.

I disagree. Paul did in Athens what he did everywhere. He told people the truth about Christ in terms they could understand. And he left the results up to God.

And there were results. The number included Dionysius, a council member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and several others. Gospel seed produced a gospel harvest, as it does wherever it goes, including Athens. And when it does, we should praise God!

Affirming the Bottom Line: How many roads lead to heaven?

Let there be no misunderstanding. The Bible is clear and so must we be as we make contact and communicate with lost people in this age of pluralism.

1. *There is one God.* He is the Creator of heaven and earth.
2. *There is one Savior.* He is God's Son, Jesus Christ.
3. *There is one way.* Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

Closing Song: #299 "*Rescue the Perishing*" (all four verses)

Community Group Discussion:

1. This morning's message was entitled, "*Taking the Gospel to Athens.*" Take time as a group to re-read the text, Acts 17:16-34. What stands out most to you from this passage? Perhaps something Paul did, or Paul encountered, or a question the account raises?
2. Why is it significant that the gospel went to Athens? What's true of Athens? How is Athens different from Jerusalem, or even Philippi?
3. In verses 16-21 we see Paul making contact with lost people in Athens. How did he do it? What do we learn about evangelism by looking at Paul's actions here?
4. In verses 22-34 we see Paul presenting the gospel in Athens. How did he do it? What are some practical lessons for us regarding how to present Christ to lost people in our pluralistic society?
5. The Lord works through the preaching of His Word to save sinners and transform them into His Son's likeness. Think back at how He has done this in your own life. Are there particular conversations or sermons that He used? Take a couple of minutes to share these reflections with the person seated next to you. Then have several share with the entire group, all to the glory of the God who saves!
6. Spend time as a group giving thanks for the wonderful gospel God has privileged us to know. Also, spend time praying and asking the Lord to bless our efforts (and those of our sister churches) in making the gospel known in our community.