

“To an Unknown God”

**Acts 17:22-31** 22 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. 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. Now what you worship as something unknown 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 hands. 25 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. 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. 27 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. 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 man's 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 all men by raising him from the dead."

**John 14:15-21** 15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be { 17 Some early manuscripts and is} in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

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I wonder what Paul would have to say to us today after walking around in our culture reflecting upon our objects of worship. Try to use your imagination a bit. In Paul's day usually the only things portrayed by images of persons were gods. Therefore, I think he would mistake nearly every billboard and nearly every advertisement he saw as an icon of some god. This would lead him to suspect that we are as extremely religious as the the Athenians were. He would assume our gods would be food, radio stations, automobiles, real estate agents, financial institutions, athletes, and underwear models. Some of the same gods would still be around like Nike. They could all be categorized just like the ancient Greek and Roman gods into groups of partying, money, power, and sex.

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Paul described the Athenians as being extremely religious. The Greek word for that basically means an excessive fear of supernatural powers. Oddly, they, the “wisest “ of all cultures, were careful not to offend any of the *daimones*. So, they had shrines for just about every god imaginable. If Paul were to look at our culture and our very arrogant desire to say that all religions are basically about the same thing, a spiritual experience that is described differently by different cultures, he would say we're not much different than the Athenians. He would probably caution us on what we call spiritual experience for in his world possession by a *daimon* or supernatural power was a very common experience and experiencing a *daimon*, like experiencing a good sunrise, is not the same thing as experiencing God.

Paul would definitely notice that our culture has a fascination with spirituality. Since the mid-60's North America has been in the midst of a huge spiritual awakening. In years past whenever one of these Awakenings has occurred people turned to the Christian faith for their answers. But, with this Awakening people are looking elsewhere with the exception of the world south of the equator where a huge Pentecostal-ish movement is growing massively. This Awakening has also produced a great number of Seekers who will only commit to their own individual belief systems because they are suspicious that those who claim to have the Truth are only trying to gain power over others.

As Paul walked through Athens, pondering the objects of their religiousness, he saw a shrine to an unknown God and this peaked his attention. So he addressed the people sitting on “Philosopher's Hill” with the idea that this God they think is unknowable is the one true God, the Creator and Lord of Creation who has revealed himself to humanity, indeed, truly made himself known to humanity in, through, and as Jesus Christ who continues to be knowable to humanity by means of the Holy Spirit.

Paul hit a core nerve with the Athenians that we would do well to ponder. The reason the Athenians were so extremely religious was that they believed that knowing a god personally was impossible. God and the gods to them were essentially unknowable. Of course, one could have experiences of *daimones*, but a true honest to God encounter with God or a god was impossible. To them encounters with gods were the things that myths were made of...and they were. Because they believed God and the gods were ultimately unknowable they built shrines where they went to perform rituals that were supposed to incite the *daimones* to regard them favourably and grant their requests.

Returning to our culture, I think Paul's diagnosis of the Athenians religiosity fits us quite well. I think if Paul were to walk through our cities and our countrysides and see all the churches that have become community centers or are just boarded up or have so dwindled off in membership they are about to become community centers, his diagnosis would be that after nearly 2,000 years we the disciples of Jesus Christ have bought into the idea that God is ultimately unknowable; and because of this the church is dying and people (particularly those north of the equator) are seeking spiritual experience by means of the *daimones*. Palm readers, spiritual guides, mediums, witches, crystal vendors, marketers of the magic of ancient peoples, and your corner drug dealer have a

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guaranteed clientèle these days. This is all because our culture as a whole believes God cannot be known.

Paul would say that we have a theological problem and by theology I don't mean the academic study of religious beliefs about God or the gods. The word theology means the study or contemplation of one's personal knowledge or experience of God. In the first couple of centuries of the church theology was in the first place to talk about the experience of prayer and faith that arose from encountering God's faithfulness and then in the second place to talk about how this faithful God has made himself known in, through, and as Jesus Christ who continues to make himself known to us by means of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, theology culminates in prayerfully pondering that God is the loving communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who has graciously adopted us each into his very self so that we know we are God's children as Jesus is.

Theology works with the basic premise that God is knowable. We are never going to understand God fully, yet understandability is not the same thing as knowability. God is knowable. The fact that most Christians think that theology is the academic study of religious beliefs about God or the gods drives home the point that your average Christian believes that God is ultimately unknowable. Yet, God is knowable, but not knowable as some sort of experience of the supernatural powers or the *daimones*. The Christian faith is that, not believes that, the Christian faith *is* that God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus so that we share in his relationship with the Father. This is what our reading in John is all about. True theology, true spiritual experience is to know personally that God the Father has been steadfastly loving and faithful to you, to me, to all just as Jesus himself knows it and to share in Jesus' own love for and faithfulness to the Father. And, empowered with their loving communion living within us each and in us as a community of faith by the presence of the Holy Spirit we share in the Jesus' mission to go into the world obeying the commandment that we love one another so that the world may know what God looks like and want to enter into the community that bears the image of God the Trinity and come to know God.

Speaking with regard to myself, my personal practice of theology should be continual reflection upon the fact that the God whom I know (and I do know God) really does love me. Your average faithful Christian begins each day saying, “Father, thank you for this day. Us me for your glory.” and then off we go. Not sure whether and if God has any use for us. I think there's a better way to start the day. I have recently grown accustomed to looking forward to the hour of the morning between five and six. That's usually when William starts to stir and grumble and complain. We can usually get another hour of sleep out of him if one of us goes and gets him and brings him to bed with me. After a couple of good kicks to the stomach he snuggles in and falls on off to sleep again. I don't sleep much for that hour but its just good to hold him. I think the better way to start the day is with resting in the bond of love that we share with God in Christ by the gift of the Holy Spirit and asking God to heal our hearts so that we can know that love more deeply. You see, the more steeped we are in knowing God and his love for us, then the more we become like God. The more we know him

and become like him, then the more he reveals himself through us and we don't have to worry about whether or not he'll use us this day or not. Amen.