

Bridging the Gap

ACTS 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. **17** So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. **18** 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.) **19** 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? **20** It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' **21** Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. **23** 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. **24** 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, **25** 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. **26** 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, **27** 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. **28** 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." **29** 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. **30** While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.' **33** At that point Paul left them. **34** But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.



What do you notice about Paul's strategies to present the Gospel in Athens?

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS	PAUL'S METHOD	THE OUTCOME	NOTES
Paul is Concerned	Paul surveys the culture of the city and observes their pervasive idolatry	Paul develops compassion for the Athenians	
Paul Tests	Paul creates a stir by arguing in the synagogue	He sees their interest.	
Paul Waits	Paul gives the Athenians time to think about his arguments.	Athenians have questions	
Paul Responds	Paul affirms their desire to worship a "god" and helps them know his God.	Paul bridges the gap between Athenian piety and divine revelation.	
Paul Proclaims	Paul points them past their generous syncretism to unique claims of Jesus	Paul leaves many of them more curious about Jesus and his resurrection	

ASSESS HOW MUCH TRUST YOU HAVE

To help you think through how much trust you currently have with a friend or family member, consider:

1. Do they call you when they have a problem?
2. Have they ever asked you for advice?
3. Can you just have fun and laugh together?

SOUL AWAKENING EVENTS THAT CAN HELP THE OPENNESS PROCESS. (From Coming to Faith)

How would you feel if you could invite your curious-but-not-yet-open friends to an event that would help them consider becoming open to spiritual things? These type of pre-evangelism events can be very helpful in the process of coming to know Jesus. But it is essential to remember that folks at this threshold are not yet seekers. It is better to think of them as skeptics or cynics. How would you create an event in order to serve those far from the Kingdom? The principles would have to be different from seeker events.

1. **Choose Relevant Topics.** Select topics that they are already thinking about. Movies, pop music, and current events are a good place to start. Romantic relationships never seem to fade as a relevant topic.
2. **Find Unique Angles.** Surprise them in how you come at these topics. Put yourself in their shoes and come at the topic from their perspective, asking their questions. Jesus always had an unexpected word for those who came to him. Similarly, seek God for an unexpected word for them.
3. **Use the Arts.** We use music and art and drama because they connect deeply and move souls. The arts are a gift from God, and God can side-step our skepticism when the arts stir new feelings within us. The soul is supposed to cry out to God, and we can create events that help people experience these yearnings for the Living God.
4. **Create a safe place.** In contrast to seekers, the not-yet-open often need a place of anonymity. They need to feel safe to explore spiritual things at an arms distance, until they warm up to God.
5. **Lead, Don't Pressure.** They need to be led toward God, but not pressured. There are two mistakes in this regard. On the one hand, we can mistake them for seekers and offer them repeated altar calls. People in this threshold often feel weird about altar calls and can misinterpret them as manipulation or cultish. Swinging to the opposite extreme, we can create environments with no leadership at all. They meander with no help from us at all.

Spend some time in groups thinking about a soul awakening event for your campus. What would raise curiosity on your campus?

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What do you notice about Paul's strategies to present the Gospel in Athens?

Paul goes to a new place and is looking around at what he sees. His concern leads him to "argue" in the synagogues, a strategy very familiar to the Athenians. They are not angry—they are more interested and give Paul the floor! When Paul gets the floor he affirms their religiousness, specifically in relation to the unknown god that they worship and uses this as a connecting point to talk about who this unknown God they worship actually is. As Doug Schaupp (Coming to Faith) says, "He sees his role as affirming kingdom impulses within them, and then pointing them to Jesus. This is a powerfully disarming habit, forging bonds of real trust."

Hard to know exactly what Paul's goal was but here are some thoughts. It could be that Paul was disturbed by how the Athenians didn't get it and he used that to test the waters a bit and see how the Athenians would respond. His arguing seems to be a culturally relevant as does his "sermon". The results are not what we are used to seeing in Acts—relatively small—but that doesn't seem to be the point the author is making. Paul sees the Athenians are misguided and he chooses to test the waters to see if they want truth.

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CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS	PAUL'S METHOD	THE OUTCOME	LEADER'S NOTES
Paul is Concerned	Explores: Paul surveys the culture of the city and observes their pervasive idolatry	Paul develops compassion for the Athenians	Paul is not oblivious. He chooses to look and engage not just his mind, but his heart. Paul's preaching in Athens is so different from his preaching anywhere else. He has taken time to observe and become a student of the culture. He could have become judgmental, but he doesn't.
Paul Tests	Argue: Paul creates a stir by arguing in the synagogue	He sees their interest.	Paul's goal is to raise curiosity. Arguing in the synagogue is the method he chooses and an effective one for Athens.
Paul Waits	Space: Paul gives the Athenians time to think about his arguments.	Athenians have questions	Athenians respond as Paul hoped, they have questions, they are curious: they arrange for him to speak in a setting where he can further draw out their interest.
Paul Responds	Affirms: Paul affirms their desire to worship a "god" and helps them know his God.	Paul bridges the gap between Athenian piety and divine revelation.	Paul uses this as an opportunity to connect with the Athenians. He has the sense that the Athenians want to know God and he demonstrates familiarity with their own poets.
Paul Proclaims	Clarifies: Paul points them past their generous syncretism to unique claims of Jesus	Paul leaves many of them more curious about Jesus and his resurrection	Paul goes beyond his affirmation of them to point out how they are misled. He affirms their desire to know this unknown God and fills in the gaps for them. He makes unique claims for the place of Jesus as LORD.

ASSESS HOW MUCH TRUST YOU HAVE

Leader's Notes: Have students assess their level of trust privately and then in groups work on a potential soul awakening event for their campus using the parameters given.

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1. Do they call you when they have a problem?
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Leader's Notes from the book *Coming to Faith.*: In any friendship trust develops over time. This could take anywhere from one day to a whole year, depending on how much distrust the non-Christian is carrying. And trust in any friendship is dynamic. There's no guarantee once that we only cross the "trust line" with someone once.

SOUL AWAKENING EVENTS THAT CAN HELP THE OPENNESS PROCESS. (From *Coming to Faith*)

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