

# To An Unknown God

Texts: Psalm 66: 8-20; Acts 17: 22-31; Bill Mills, *Adequate: How God Empowers Ordinary People To Serve*  
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When Paul had to go up on the Areopagus in Athens, it was like taking to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at one end of the Mall in Washington, DC to make a speech to the nation on a controversial subject.

Paul was giving an introduction of the meaning of Jesus the Messiah to people who had never heard of Jesus before. In fact, most of them had likely never heard of the God of the Hebrews before.

They'd heard of the goddess of wisdom, Athena, after whom their city was named. And they'd heard of Ares, the god of war, after whom the Areopagus was named. They'd heard of Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian gods, and of his jealous wife, Hera, and of Apollo, the god of prophecy, music and healing, and they'd heard of Hermes, the messenger god, and of many, many others, like Dionysius, the god of wine and celebration, and Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, and of Artemis, Demeter, and Hades.

But of the Hebrew God, Yahweh, they had never heard. And of Jesus and his resurrection, they knew nothing.

Paul needed to be brilliant, and he was brilliant.

You see, the Athenians were also a sophisticated people, the acknowledged leaders of ancient thought, whose city was the center of intellectual life in the Roman Empire.

And the Areopagus was the center of Athens. There it was that the citizens of Athens had met to discuss all manner of things for the last five hundred years, from the time they invented the idea of democracy, through the trial of Socrates, right down to Paul's appearance there.

Paul didn't just show up. The text tells us that he was there at the invitation of some Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.

The Stoics thought the universe had no beginning and no end, and that there was no life after death.

The Epicureans thought the gods were indifferent to human affairs. They taught that pleasure was the greatest good, and not service to the gods, who didn't care.

Tough crowd.

So Paul probably knew that he was up against it before he even began his speech. In fact, the text tells us that some of these philosophers had been heard to be asking each other, "What is this babbler trying to say? Something or other about foreign gods, I think."

Suffice it to say, then, that his hosts had come supplied with cabbages and tomatoes to throw at their distinguished guest in case he said something they didn't like.

Now, Paul knows that he's not just surrounded by philosophers, but by common people, and so he speaks over the heads of the philosophers, as it were, and straight to the heart of the ordinary citizens of Athens. Or at least to the men, since only the men were allowed to be there. In spite of all their speculative brilliance and political philosophizing, the Greeks hadn't invented equal rights for women yet.

"Men of Athens!" Paul says, "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."

Now why did they have an altar to an unknown god? In the ancient world, as you might have guessed from the list of gods the Athenians *did* know, there were many gods, each with a distinct role to play in the world, and each with a rather tricky and jealous personality.

If you were having trouble, it was likely that you had upset some god or other, or so they thought.

To get out of trouble, you had to appease the right god. But which god was that? And what if your trouble came from some god you didn't know about?

Well, best to make the rounds of all the gods, and if you were still in doubt, then you could go to the altar of an unknown god, and sacrifice there to make peace with any that you'd missed.

And Paul used that altar to proclaim the story of the true and living God to the Athenians, and the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul found a part of Athenian culture that was an inroad into their thinking, a hook that he could use to draw them in to Christ and bring them to faith in God.

Now, you might be thinking that I am going to say something like, "it's our task to find similar hooks in our own culture, similar inroads, so that we can speak to those who don't know anything about God's love for them in Jesus, and, just as importantly, to speak to those who believe in some other, terrifying god who cruelly punishes people

with plagues and hurricanes for being who they are and loving whom they love, and who think that god is the Christian God.

And on another occasion, I might say something like that, with examples of possible ways of finding that hook and making those inroads.

But today I'm not going to say that. I'm going to pass over the way that the current interest in astrology and witchcraft, and even the new atheism, points to a deep spiritual quest in people.

I'm not going to mention that many people say they like Jesus, but not the church, and I won't bring up that the church is just the place where people are trying to get to know Jesus better so they can be like him.

I can pass over the many people who say that they are spiritual but not religious, and the many implications that that has for the way we act in church and in the world.

I will say nothing about the way that social networks like Facebook and Twitter and Instagram point to a deep desire for the kind of interpersonal connection that has been a hallmark of Christian faith from the beginning.

I'm not even going to bring up the aging baby boomers and how their newfound fear of mortality might make them open to hearing about a God and a Savior they've never had time for before.

Nor will I say anything about the racism, sexism, homophobia and downright greed of so many of those in our society who say they speak for God, yet are filled with hate, not love, for their neighbor, whose misshapen message needs correcting by those who know the God of love.

There is no time to tell you about the damage that these people do to the whole idea of religious faith whenever they use whatever current ill is plaguing the world to say that it's god's punishment on us for tolerating people and practices they don't like.

No, you won't hear a word about any of that from me today.

Instead, I want to talk about the unknown God. Not the God who was unknown to the ancient Athenians, nor the God who is unknown to many people out there, but the God who is unknown even to many in here, in the wider church. We need to start, as in so much else, with ourselves!

You see, the problem isn't just that people out there don't know God, it's that people in here don't either. People fall prey to the cruel, punishing, misogynistic, homophobic, sexist version of God because they aren't hearing any alternative from us.

Recently I've been troubled by various surveys of American religious knowledge. The surveys have discovered that it is not broad and not deep, at least not as broad and deep as the love of God for us.

For example, one found that the most widely known biblical verse is, "God helps those who help themselves."

And that is great, except for the fact that it's a saying of Benjamin Franklin's and isn't in the Bible at all. And except for the fact that it actually conflicts with most of the Biblical story, where it's truer to say that God helps those who call on God for help.

But apart from that, it's great!

The Pew Survey of Religious Knowledge showed that Bible knowledge is at an all time low.

It reported that many people did not know who led the Israelites out of Egypt, whether it was Job, Elijah, Moses or Abraham. In case you have forgotten, and there's a one in three chance that you have, it was ... Moses!

One half of Protestants had a hard time figuring out which of the following was *not* one of the ten commandments: Do not commit adultery; Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; Do not steal; Keep the Sabbath holy.

The correct answer is, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's the Golden Rule, and it's part of Jesus' teaching, not a commandment.

And there is a 66% probability, or a two in three chance that you won't know which Bible figure is most closely associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering, whether it's Job, Elijah, Moses, or Abraham. ... It was Job.

What was especially sad was that the highest scorers in the survey were people who identified themselves as atheists or agnostics. They knew more about the Bible and the Christian faith than any Christian group, from Evangelicals to Mainline Protestants to Roman Catholics.

It turns out that the unknown God is most unknown among that God's own followers! And that is bad news for the good news.

It's bad news, not because there's some sort of Bible quiz to get into heaven, but because it's impossible to live your life as God intended if you have no idea about God's intentions for your life.

It's bad news because it's impossible to have a rich and full spiritual life with an impoverished and empty knowledge of who God is.

It's bad news because it's impossible to have confidence in God's plans for your future if you don't know how God's plans have worked out for people in the past, especially since it often seems that the middle of God's plan is full of difficulty and defeat, and God seems nowhere to be found.

And it's bad news because it will be miserable to spend eternity with a God who is a stranger to you, who is an unknown God.

Christ calls us into a passionate love affair with the God who loves us, and it's impossible to be in love with someone with whom you have no more history than Joe Bloggs or Samantha Wimple. What? ... Who? ... Right!

It's bad news especially for the good news of Jesus and his resurrection because if the announcers of the good news don't know anything about it, or announce some cruel parody of the good news which sounds a lot like bad news for most people, then the message of God's love for all can't possibly get through in any credible way.

The God who made the world, and called Israel out of Egypt, and sent the prophets, and took on flesh in Jesus Christ, whose Spirit fills the church, this God is unknown to so many, and our human history with this God is a mystery.

And yet it is this God who has called us here, who has loved us and not forsaken us, who has promised mercy and grace to us.

As Christians, we must know more about this God than atheists and agnostics! We have to become passionate about hearing what this God has done in the past and passionate about speaking about what this God is doing for us in the present.

We have to know this God, this unknown God, so that we can live and breathe and drink God's goodness to us, and pass it on to others, so that the world hears a message, not about a god who hates them, but about a God whose love for them will never end.

Let us come to the communion table and draw close to the God we know in Jesus Christ. Amen