

## **Acts 17:15, 22-18:1**

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles today provides us with one of the truly fascinating accounts in the early Church. Essentially, Paul's interaction with the pagans in Athens brings together two very different worlds.

On the one hand, we have Paul who represents the world of Judaism and its insistence that there is only one God. This God created the heavens and the earth and does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands. For Paul, God has not abandoned creation, but rather orders things in such a way that people will seek Him.

In contrast to the Judaic worldview, we get a glimpse of the Hellenistic world in the city of Athens. Athens was known as an intellectual and religious center where philosophers argued about the meaning of life, the nature of the world, and the afterlife. Additionally, we hear that in this culture, there was a general belief that there was not just one God, but many gods.

In fact, the lectionary cuts out six verses that tell us that as Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, he was deeply distressed as he looked around at all of the idols. While distressed, however, notice what he does. Instead of condemning them right away, he looks for a bridge – something they share in common – to begin the dialogue.

He says, *"You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious."* Paul begins with this opening so that he can present the gospel. In doing so, he doesn't work from the Old Testament because they are not familiar with it. Instead, he begins with one of their shrines that has an altar inscribed, *"To an unknown God."* He then corrects or clarifies their understanding by appealing to the doctrine of creation, which is a bedrock of Christian belief.

In arguing from creation, Paul incorporates some of their writers and philosophers. *"In him we live and move and have our being"* is a quote from a sixth century B.C. poet. *"For we too are his offspring"* is from a fourth century B.C. poet. He quotes from their people as he argues his point.

In short, Paul tailors his speech so that his audience can understand it. It's a great lesson in how to evangelize. In order to build a relationship, begin with what they already believe and work from there. Find out what you have in common, and slowly clarify and correct errors. And even when rejected, like Paul, charitably move on to the next place with the Good News about Jesus Christ.

~St. Thérèse, pray for us!