

To an Unknown God

Hespeler, May 10, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Christian Family Sunday

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

One argument that you might hear against believing in God goes like this. The atheist reminds the believer that, in the history of the world, people have believed in many different gods. People have worshipped gods like Zeus and Jupiter. They have pledged their faith to Athena, Ra, Odin and Thor, and the list goes on and on.

“But you,” the atheist says to the believer, “You reject all of those gods. You think that all of those people were wrong to believe in them. Well, I just wanted to let you know that I agree with you. I don’t believe in any of those gods either. In fact, we are almost the same. It is just that I believe in one less god than you.”

I Don’t Get It

I don’t know about you, but I have come across that argument a few times, and I have to admit that it doesn’t quite make sense to me. I get the implication. The idea is that the rejection of *any* idea of God is merely the logical extension of what everyone does when they choose not to believe in Zeus or Odin.

But there are some big assumptions behind all of that that I do not accept. And without those assumptions, the argument falls flat.

Paul in Athens

But rather than talk to you about my assumptions, let me dig into what the Apostle Paul says in our reading this morning from the Book of Acts instead, because I think that we are on much the same wavelength when it comes to these matters.

In this passage, Paul is in the city of Athens, which is the heart of Ancient Greek religion, philosophy and culture. Since the Athenians love to talk and debate about everything, when Paul shows up in the city and starts preaching strange new ideas about a guy named Jesus and about the resurrection, he causes a bit of a stir.

At the Areopagus

And so, he is invited to address a meeting of the Areopagus. The Areopagus was named after a rugged hill in the centre of the city, the hill of the god Ares. Likely originally a place devoted to the war god where Athenians mustered for battle, centuries of peace had transformed the gatherings associated with that hill into more of a debating society where they gathered to talk about the latest and trendiest ideas.

This is a remarkable opportunity. Paul is, both from his Jewish heritage and from his new Christian faith, a monotheist. He believes that there is only one God who is the Creator of heaven and earth and the Father of his Lord Jesus Christ.

A Perfect Opportunity to Criticize

And here he is in the very centre of Greek polytheism – in the city of the goddess Athena and surrounded by ancient temples dedicated to the great gods of the Olympian pantheon. These people believe in so many gods that Paul doesn’t believe in.



So, Paul has a perfect opportunity to attack them for their beliefs. He could do a whole routine. “Are you telling me that you actually believe in a god who turned himself into a <snigger> golden shower to seduce a princess?” “And is the patron goddess of your city so petty that she once turned a woman into a spider because she was a better weaver?”

Yes, Paul could have attacked all of the Greek gods and offered reasons why they were ridiculous. Every religion, including our own, has certain elements that can be attacked in this manner.

Paul Praises

But Paul does not do this. In fact, he begins by praising them for their belief. **“Athenians,”** he says, **“I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way.”** And he seems to mean this sincerely. In fact, he points to one particular thing about their spirituality that particularly impresses him. **“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.’”**

These sorts of altars did actually exist in the ancient world, by the way. None have actually been dug up in Athens, but they have been found in many other ancient cities, including one in the very centre of Ancient Rome.

Paul doesn’t bring this altar up to make fun of them, though. He is not laughing at them because they have so many gods that they lose track of them or anything like that. He celebrates the fact that they are stretching towards divinity that they do not understand. **“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”**

Unknowingly Worshipping God

That is remarkable when you think about it. Here is Paul, speaking to these polytheists and suggesting that they have been unknowingly worshipping the same God that he, a monotheist, worships. How can this be?

I understand it like this. If God exists – if there is a supernatural being who created all things and is somehow involved in keeping the universe running – that God, almost by definition, is beyond all human understanding.

Human Limitations

We can’t describe or define God. Our human language does not have the words. Nor can we imagine or conceptualize such a God because our human minds are too limited.

That means that whatever we can say or think about God is going to be imperfect and incomplete. And yet, as human beings, we are drawn to God. It seems to be built into our very humanity.

Imperfect Concepts

And so it is that almost every civilization has come up with some concept of the divine. They tell stories and write poetry about beings who are beyond their understanding.

Are all of these ideas that they have about their gods completely true and correct? Did the gods of the Greeks literally live on Mount Olympus? Did the Norse gods ride eight-legged horses over a bridge made out of a rainbow? Of course not. At best these are metaphors and myths that may point to some truths about a universal deity. They represent human attempts at reaching towards a reality that human minds cannot comprehend.

How They Stretch Towards God

And that is what Paul celebrates in the Athenians. They are stretching towards a God who is a lot like the God that he proclaims. In fact, he congratulates them on getting a number of things right about God.

He gives them a quote from one of their own religious poets. He cites the poet Epimenides, who lived in Crete in the sixth century BC. Epimenides wrote, **“In him we live and move and have our being.”** And then he quotes the Stoic philosopher, Aratas, who wrote two centuries later, **“For we, too, are his offspring.”**

These two men lived centuries before the time of Christ, so think about what Paul is saying here. He is saying that, for a very long time, the Greeks have carried with them accurate understandings about the same God that he worships.

About Zeus

What’s more, both of these philosophers wrote these words about the Greek God Zeus. So, Paul is actually saying to the Greeks that, by believing in Zeus, they were striving towards belief in the true God. He is effectively saying that they were somewhat right to believe in Zeus for all those centuries.

Of course, he is also saying that their belief was imperfect and incomplete and that he has some better information for them, but he does not say that they were wrong.

Paul Has Better Information

Paul believes that he has better information because of what he has experienced in Christ Jesus. And that is indeed what Christians have claimed ever since – that God has revealed Godself to humanity in a unique way in Jesus Christ.

But does that mean that Paul is saying that he has the full and absolute truth about God, that he has completely comprehended the nature of God? He would not claim that. He, too, is merely reaching towards a God who remains unknowable to mere humans. It is just that he has been assisted in that quest by his faith in Jesus Christ.

We All Get It Wrong

So that is I why I do not really buy the argument of the Atheists who say that they just believe in one less god than I do. Yes, I do not believe in the reality of gods like Zeus and Thor. But I do recognize that the people who did believe in them were reaching towards the same truth that I am reaching towards.

Even more important, I also recognize that my concept of God is also flawed and incomplete. Yes, the Creator of heaven and earth has been uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, but I have barely scratched the surface of who Jesus really is. And the God that I worship is ultimately unknowable in human terms anyway. That is one of the things that makes God worth worshipping.

Masculine Ways of Imagining God

And all of this speaks very meaningfully to me on this day known as Mother’s Day. I am always made aware of how inadequate our language and understanding of God are on the second Monday in May.

So many of the ways we talk about God, for example, are masculine. We particularly love to call God, “Father.” And not without reason, of course, because that seems to have been Jesus’ favourite way to refer to God.

And calling God a heavenly Father is indeed a beautiful way to speak. It celebrates God's love and protection for God's people. It is a helpful way to talk about God, at least for those who have had positive experiences with their own human fathers. But does it mean that God is male in the way that we human beings experience maleness? Of course not.

Father is a metaphor for God – a way of reaching towards the reality of God that is imperfect and limited by our humanity. But other ways of speaking about God can also reach towards that same reality.

Feminine Ways of Imagining God

On this Mother's Day, I absolutely affirm that it can be very good to talk about God as Mother too. The Bible itself does use mother language to speak about God. **“As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you,”** God says in the Book of Isaiah. (Isaiah 66:13) And also, **“Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these might forget, yet I will not forget you.”** (Isaiah 49:15)

God is said to be like a mother bear in the Book of Hosea (Hosea 13:8) and like a mother eagle in Deuteronomy. (Deuteronomy 32:11-12) So even the Bible, written in an extremely patriarchal culture though it was, was able to reach towards God by thinking of God using feminine imagery.

God Doesn't Fit Human Categories

Why can the Bible talk like that? Because God, being unknowable, does not fit into human categories such as male and female or human roles such as mother and father.

Calling God Mother does not mean God is female any more than calling God Father makes God male. But it is a beautiful reminder that our experiences of mothers and the love that they offer can teach us so much about the true nature of God, even if, as it says in Isaiah, God's love exceeds even the love of a human mother.

The failure of believers to completely define or even agree about the God that they worship is not a problem for believers. It is certainly not a reason to abandon belief in divinity altogether. Far from despising the ancients or those who follow other religions because they do not imagine the divine in the way that I do, I like Paul, am willing to acknowledge that they are stretching towards the same thing that I am. Like Paul, I am willing to learn from their insights and wisdom.

And if I do recognize that they were imperfect in what they found and in the worship that they offered, I also humbly accept my own failure to properly conceive of God and to offer God all the worship that God deserves.

The ultimate unknowableness of God is not a bug; it is a feature. It encourages us continually in our quest to find God.