

Grace Fellowship Church

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Series: Acts

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Stir Us Up!

Acts 17:22-24

If you're here this morning and you don't have a Bible with you, slip up your hands, and we will put a Bible in your hand, and when you get that Bible, open it up to Acts 17. How many of you grew up in traditional churches where they did the Advent candles, and you celebrated Advent? Look at all you traditionalists. Are you okay here?

For the last few years, we've been doing the Advent season. We're going to do it again this year. If you grew up in one of those where they really deeply practiced the Advent wreaths and the candles and all of those kinds of things, you may or may not be aware that traditionally this Sunday, the Sunday *before* the Advent season, is called "Stir-up Sunday." Does anybody know that? Stir-up Sunday. So some of you are not as traditional as you think you are.

This is kind of Stir-up Sunday for us because I noticed... You know, we put a center aisle here, and we put the Communion out there in the middle, and we're going to continue to do that. We really want us as a congregation to understand this is a very significant thing as part of our gathering together, and Christ said, "As often as you do this, do this in remembrance of Me."

Sometimes we don't take the time to teach and to practice and to teach by practicing that this is a significant thing.

This is a significant thing, but moving things around, I noticed that some of you are not sitting in your normal places. I'm trying to find some of you, and I just go, *Oh wait a minute! You used to be over there.* It's a troubling thing when we can't go in and find our spot, but anyway.

If you have your Bible open there to Acts 17, we've been exploring Acts, and the word *Acts* you will remember means praxis, and the church in Acts and the churches of Acts were not perfect churches, but they do...and listen to this...and they were designed and chosen, the accounts and narratives that are described there, to provide us a pattern. That's an important understanding that they provide us a pattern, and it's part of a much larger narrative of the Scriptures where it starts over here with this absolutely amazing earth where Eden, everything is perfect, and men and women and God are in harmony.

The first real crisis of the Scriptures is where mankind is exiled from Eden because of their treason, and this part of the narrative, this storyline, the plot line, it follows the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, where the kingdom of God is announced. This is part of God's great salvation kingdom history timeline, and what happens here in Acts is the narrative explodes. The kingdom is announced, the death, burial, resurrection, and then the church is called to take this gospel, this kingdom announcement, to the ends of the earth.

Then all of the epistles, all of those little letters, all those parts between Acts and Revelation, actually fit right in the narrative of Acts. They just fit in there, the stories. That's when they were written, and then you have the final consummation in the book of Revelation. So there's a narrative that goes on there. There's a plot line. There's a script.

Here in Acts 17 (and I just want to make sure I make this point), the church sometimes is called a parenthesis. You'll say, *We're in the church age*, and it's a parenthesis, a waiting for Jesus to come back. I don't like that word picture of the parenthesis. We are not on pause. That's not where we are. We have been given this amazing privilege.

We are the ground troops to announce the ultimate regime change that has ever taken place, and this regime change is not going to be confined to the nations; it's going to be a cosmic reversal of order, and that which has been promised prophetically is going to be fulfilled in Revelation, but we are the kingdom disciples, and we've already...hopefully you have already...experienced that personal regime change, and now we are recruited as ambassadors welcoming all who want to join this league of liberators.

Now if you have a passion, or you are possessed with a passion for reaching those who seem to be out of reach... Some people are easy. Have you ever noticed that? You just like share the gospel, and it's like an apple falling out of the tree. It just hits you in the head. I mean, they're just so easy. Some people when you want to talk to them about Jesus, you'll just say, "Let's talk about Jesus," and then you talk about Jesus. Some people you know that, *Well I think they are not born again, but they are far from the kingdom*. Have you ever known people like that?

Some people, you look at them, and you know they're lost, but they're not just lost. There's an old Southern phrase. It's called, "They're lost like a ball in high weeds." They are like *lost* lost. They aren't just apart from God; they've like remade God. They aren't lost and know it; they are lost and don't know it.

Now the *bad* thing about this, the hard thing about that is some of you have really good friends like that, and that's cool. Some of you have people in your family like that, and some of you Thursday are going to hang out with them, and you don't have even a clue what to say to them because you know that everything you believe not only they don't believe it, they like believe the opposite. Can you say amen?

Now then, if you have people you love who are really lost, I mean lost deeply, Acts 17 is a chapter you don't want to just read; you want to carefully consider because what we find is a pattern. It is a model. It is a way to reach those who are really, really, really lost. Here Paul goes into a place called Athens, and Athens wasn't just your average spot. Athens is an old, arrogant, elitist, privileged, intellectual aristocracy.

The world of the Greeks was really a world of better-than-you thinking, and the reason they thought that, and the reason they saw themselves in that light is because it really was true. The great poets, philosophers, artists, they walked the streets of Greece, and you might imagine that these great thinkers, these people who had been really worshiped through the ages, that these

people were absent an understanding of God at all or a hunger of God, but if you did, you would be severely mistaken.

Look at Acts 17:19. They take him to the Areopagus, which is just the big square. Paul had this methodology he followed, and this methodology he followed took him to cities, people centers, and when he would go into the people centers, he would go first for the synagogues, the places that had some religious concept and a foundation, and if they rejected, he would go to the marketplace and the main streets, and if that didn't work...and sometimes he would do it simultaneously...he would go to the gatekeepers of information and culture.

This is not Sunday school. This is not a house church; this is taking the kingdom to the anti-kingdom. This is not a passive defense; this is an aggressive, hit-the-beach, beachhead kingdom work. So he goes in there, and he starts talking to them, and they say to him, "This is a strange doctrine we're hearing here."

Look at verse 22. "Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that...'" (Acts 17:22) you are arrogant fools. Are you reading? How far do you think he would have got at that point? Not very far! Sometimes the only tact we have sometimes is attack. We kind of have the idea that if we really believe the gospel that what we really need to do is just go up and smack somebody in the nose with it. We find lost people and we go, "There's a word for you in the English. It's called *pagan*." They already know that, but usually they don't like hearing it, or maybe they do.

So he stands up and he says, "...I perceive that in all things you are..." what? "...very religious..." (Acts 17:22) Now some translations put that *superstitious*, but literally it's the word from divinity, and it really has to do with, "You are God fearers. You have a fear of God."

"...for as I was passing through..." and look at this word, "...and considering..." (Acts 17:23) This word *considering* literally means to study carefully. It means to look and really analyze. He said, "I was analyzing your '...objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore..." (Acts 17:23) you are idiots.

Is that what he says? No! Now I come back to this really key thing. Now we believe Jesus is the message, amen? Do we believe Jesus is the method? When Jesus goes in John 4, and He talks to the woman at the well, He doesn't just *bam! bam! bam!* and say, "You Samaritans have been a problem for generations. You Samaritans wanted to mess up the rebuilding of the temple. Have you read the prophets? Man, you guys were the problem all the way along. If you had got your act together, this never would've happened." No, He doesn't do that!

Now when Paul goes in, there is going to come a time in the conversation he's going to say their thought processes don't even add up. "You don't even agree with your own conclusions. Your life doesn't add up here," but he doesn't start there. He starts there by noticing the reality that these people are pretty religious. They're serious about this.

They're so serious about it, that they don't want to offend even a God they don't know, and he says, "Listen, you have this statue, this monument to the Unknown God." Notice what he says.

"Therefore the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you..." (Acts 17:23)

Now here are some things I want us to look at this morning, and if you have that handout sheet, there are some of the things we looked at last week and never got to.

1. *What did Paul see?* He saw a city that was literally deeply submerged in idolatry. It's the word that they're using, *given over*. It's the word of the addict. They're addicted to idolatry.

2. *What did Paul feel?* His heart was that it just troubled him. He was irritated. It bothered him that they were so captive in this idolatry.

3. *What does Paul do?* Paul engages.

4. *What does Paul say?* He begins with something they agree on. He begins in this common ground, and we're going to look at how they responded. Now there are some assumptions, and these assumptions are incredibly important.

1. *God is already at work.* Okay? God is already at work. This is a really important assumption. There are times we have this idea that if we're going to do the work of the gospel all the work is our responsibility. One of the wonderful things about preaching is to know that God's been preparing a message in me, and it's always so interesting to me. I'll hear people say, "I've been thinking about this that week. That's so odd, isn't it?" No, let me tell you something; it's not odd at all.

You know why? Because there is a person called the Holy Spirit. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Now if you believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the most effective evangelist you can possibly imagine at all, and our job isn't really to convert people; our job is to find out where God is converting them. Sometimes the best thing to do is not go in proclaiming, but actually going in and asking questions. "How are you doing? What's going on in your life?"

A number of years ago when we first started the Midtown campus, I was trying to really think through how we do evangelism among college kids because I kept hearing this postmodern mentality. They didn't believe in truth, and by the way, all the Tech students just about believe in truth. You know why? They're engineers. You can't be a postmodern engineer because if you're a postmodern engineer, you get kicked out of school. Numbers actually have to add up. I mean, that's how that works. Now you can be quite postmodern over at Emory or even SCAD. You can paint something and if nobody can figure out what it is, it might even be better.

We were working through how do we share the gospel with these folks because our job is to announce the kingdom, and one of the things God really laid on my heart is in conversations when you really had a relational connection with someone, this may not seem like an evangelism question at all, but I promise you it is a really good evangelism question. It's basically this...*Do you ever just feel like the whole world is messed up?*

Now let me ask you something...*Do you ever feel that way?* Do you ever click on the news and say, "Does anything work?" Does the economy work? Does the ecology work? Does the education system work? I've asked numbers of kids this before. "Do you know any married

people who like each other?" This is rhetorical. Don't answer. You know what? More often than not, you know what the answer is? "No. No."

Now let me ask you something. How sad is that? Sometimes when I'm going to do a wedding I will say to someone, "So is there anybody you know you really would like a marriage like theirs?" They'll often look at me and go, "Not your mom and dad," and the other one will look at them and say, "Neither one of our parents; we don't want a marriage like that."

Now what I'm saying to you is the reason this is an evangelism question is because you can go in and you can say, "Have you ever read Romans 3:23? 'For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.'" (Romans 3:23) Now that's a true verse, amen? You know what it means? The whole world is messed up. The whole world is just messed up! There is a reality we are facing here. The whole world is just absolutely broken.

Does anybody remember that Bob Dylan song, "The World Is Broken"? It really wasn't that good. He should've just been a poet and not sung. There are five basic assumptions, and the first one...and we're going to come back in and dig down on this...is that God is already at work.

*2. Because God is already at work, people are incurably religious.* They are! People are incurably religious. People who reject God will find another god. They will! They will not remain godless. Even if that god is themselves, they will find another god. There has never been a society no matter how primitive that has ever been discovered that did not have some kind of

understanding that mankind has a soul. Now why is that? It's because God is already at work.

People are incurably religious.

3. *Religion, absent Jesus, is distorted and twisted.* That's important to understand, that religion, if it doesn't have Jesus as its lens by which it understands that religion, it will always be twisted and distorted. It will be mangled. It will be wrong.

Now some of you grew up in churches that were unbelievably religious, and some of those churches were just stifling and legalistic, and your theology is shaped more by your religion than it is by Jesus. This is really important if we do not understand that the lens by which we interpret theology, the lens by which we understand God is Jesus. This is how we understand who God is!

You say, *Well I have this system of theology.* Every system of theology...read the Gospels and see if you can put it in Jesus' lips. If you can't put it on Jesus' lips, if it doesn't ring with reality coming from the voice of Jesus, you have misinterpreted theology. This is what Jesus said. This isn't me. This is what Jesus said, "If you have seen Me, you've seen the Father."

Whoa! That really is an amazing thing. We use a shape in our discipleship stuff, and we've done it here before, but let me put it back up here...*Up, In, and Out.* Every church, every person, every missional community group, every gathering really should be measured by how we're doing on these three areas, and it starts with this whole idea of *Up*. Do we really know God? Now that is not the question, "Are we religious?" Because what did I tell you? Everybody is incurably

religious. You may be even somewhat righteous or self-righteous, but this whole issue of do we know God?

There's a word. Boy, I really hate to try to put this up here. *Transcendent*. Is that right? You think that's right? I think it's right. Transcendent. God is transcendent. Now you know what that means? That means God is above, before, beyond, completely outside of creation. That's a really important idea that God is absolutely beyond our ability to even comprehend. He is lofty. He's high.

There are systems of theology like pantheism that God is *in* everything. There is a sense in which God is in everything, but God is contained by nothing. There are no words, there are no poems, and there are no experiences that are capable of comprehending or explaining the extent that which God is. He is above and beyond everything.

We live on a timeline, and we are *contained* in this timeline, and we tend to think that God is on this timeline with us, and that He is going into tomorrow with us, but what the Bible teaches about God is that He is eternal. We are not going into tomorrow with God; God is already there. Now if that kind of doesn't bug your brain a little bit, you're just not buggy.

You say, *Well wait a minute. Tomorrow hasn't happened yet.* Well it has with God. I remember coming across this phrase years ago. Has it ever occurred to you that nothing has ever occurred to God? God has never gone, *Ha! Wouldn't have ever guessed that.*

Now then, if God is transcendent... We've lost so many words, and it's sad, but we need to get back to these big ideas of God because God is not contained in our little ideas, in our little statues, in our little idolatries. Now we're coming into the Advent season, and one of the things that happens here is the incarnation, and God comes to us. God comes to us.

We cannot go to God, but God comes to us, and this is the incarnation. He comes to us, and this whole thing of *In* has to do with community. Do we know one another? Do we care about one another? Do we know one another's names? Do we care about one another's pains? Do we know the people down the street? Do we know their kids? This is this whole idea of *In*.

Now where this connects up is incredibly important. If we understand and if we think through the incarnation and the fact that God transcends creation but He enters creation, one of the most important things about reaching out is as we reach out is the reality that God has already preceded us, and there is preceding grace in that environment, and all we really are doing is joining God where God is already at work.

Now here's what we tend to do: We think we're going to go out and do this work for God. We're going to go out and convict people. Let me just tell you something; you won't really convict people. You'll just make them mad.

Listen, do you know anybody, even people who say they aren't sinners, who don't know they're sinners? Now you might know a psychopath because they're out there. If you don't know one, you might be him! Most people know they're sinners, and they know what kind of sin they're in,

and the Holy Spirit is already convicting them. If you join with them, and you go, "I'm here to let you know you are a rotten, lost person apart from God," I'm telling you, it doesn't work, and you're trying to be the Holy Spirit. Guess what? You're not. You are not! What you can do is be a student of what God is *already* doing there, and you can ask questions, and you can join in.

This is actually a bit uncomfortable for me what Paul does here. Paul goes, "I've been walking around, and I see this monument you have out there to the unknown God. I want to tell you, this God you worship without understanding who He is, I want to tell you who He is." Is Paul compromising here? Is Paul saying idolatry is okay in some forms? No! You know what he does? He starts quoting some of their own prophets, and he starts getting engaged there, and he says, "Listen, God is (and this is what they understood) transcendent." They knew this.

They knew that God was transcendent and that God is beyond calculation and comprehension, but here's what God says: He wants us to know Him. He commands us to seek him, and all throughout Scriptures we find people who possess, or it might be better phrased possessed...listen...by the knowledge of the holy.

Remember what I said? That first great crisis was the exile from Eden, and then you move into these stories of Enoch who walks with God, and Abraham who was called a friend of God, and Moses who knows God as a man knows a friend, and David who's called a man after My own heart, and the great cry of the prophets is that we have forgotten God.

Now we are coming into that really a few weeks from Christmas, and the church global has practiced a rhythm of sorts for hundreds of years, and this Advent is not only to celebrate and honor Christ's birth, but is a discipline to discipline our hearts, to recalibrate our hungers and our thirst. Like years past, we're going to do what the church has done. We're going to talk about hope, and we're going to talk about love, and we're going to talk about joy, and we're going to talk about peace, and we're going to land on this whole thing where we find those thing is Jesus.

We need to ask ourselves the question because we need to calibrate our heart...*Am I a person of hope?* Do you think when most people who are un-churched look at the church they go, *Now that is a community characterized by hope?* Or do they look at us and say, *Now that is a community characterized by condemnation, by doomsday-ism?* Even the whole idea that Jesus is coming back has turned into something to be afraid of!

Listen, anytime you hear anybody say they know when Jesus is coming back, run! They are trying to sell you something. "Jesus is coming back. You don't need all that money in your bank account." Be careful. The fact that Jesus is coming back is a *good* thing. It's an *amazing* thing. It is an exciting thing. Things are going to be put right, and the only reason you would want to be fearful of Jesus coming is if you are an unjust person and an abuser and an oppressor of people, amen?

If you long for liberty and for people not to live in poverty, and it breaks your heart that one more child is starved, Jesus' coming back is good news! I'm excited about it. Love, joy, and peace. Are we people of peace, are we people who really demonstrate love, and are we

characterized by joy? We're going to start the New Year by the way with a congregational call to prayer. I think if there has ever been a time that the church needs to get on its knees and pray for God to stir the hearts of the church, it's today.

We have never done this before, and it may just fall flat, and if it does, I'm going to preach on it for 10 years if I live that long. We're going to give this thing a shot. January 1 is that first Sunday, and it's going to be focused in on prayer, and we are going to turn the foyer into a prayer chapel. We are going to try to enlist people to be here 24/7 for the first seven days of 2012. Not nearly as many claps on that 24/7 thing. Yeah. Amen. Some of you, you don't sleep that well anyway, but you sleep fairly when you come to church.

We're going to turn the foyer into a prayer place, and we're going to put a sign up there. "You need prayer 24/7. Come on in." Now do you think anybody needs prayer in this community? *We* need prayer in this community. We need to see God do something. Do you want to have another year like you had last year? No! Maybe some of you do. Well pray for that kind of year.

This Sunday has been traditionally that, and I put it up on the top of your sheet. "Stir up we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of Thy people." Now that's an important prayer. It doesn't say, "Stir up Your will in the people." Stir up our will. What does that mean? Psalm 23:3 says, "He restores my soul..." (Psalm 23:3) Psalm 51:8-9: "Remove the stain of my guilt. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me." (Psalm 51:8-9) Psalm 60:1: "...restore us again!" (Psalm 60:1) Psalm 80:1: "O Shepherd...lead...like a flock... Stir up Your

strength...save us! Restore us... Cause Your face to shine..." (Psalm 81:1-3) upon us. Restore us, O God!

I am going to quit here, but I want to say our theology must be Jesus-shaped or it will be misshaped, and the incarnation is the reality that God came, and that God continues to come, and He's coming again.

Let's pray: Father, thank You for You. Lord, we pray, and we echo that prayer from that English *Book of Common Prayer*, Stir us, O God. Stir the wills of Your people. We echo out of Psalms, restore in us a heart of praise. Lord, revive Your people. Renew Your church. Renew Your heart within us and renew our heart toward You.

Lord, we echo that prayer of the Psalm 67. Bless us, O God. Make Your face to shine upon us that the world might know, that the nations might know, even those who have never heard Your name might know, Lord, that You are transcendent, that You are above and beyond, but that You condescended to walk among us. O God, it humbles our hearts. Lord, help us not to just breeze through this Christmas season. Stir our hearts, O God, we pray. In Your holy name we pray, amen.