

Religion or superstition - magical thinking - spirituality.

This is what Paul was trying to address in this famous forum in Athens that day.

The Areopagus was this great stone platform – a public forum -
where people discussed the ideas of the day.

Perhaps it might have been something like “Sixty Minutes” or “Dateline.”

Athens was still an important center for learning.

They would probably have enjoyed presidential candidate debates.

I wonder how they would have been at asking the questions, at getting to the heart of an issue,
or asking questions that helped the speaker clarify the issue or vision.

Maybe they did this with Paul

because this speech took on special significance.

and it may be why the event is recorded for us to read here in the book of Acts.

He was able to articulate something very important for those listening.,

Let’s see if he can for you and me.

Some would have heard Paul speak in the synagogue, or the marketplace.

And people must have been taken with his ideas -
or he would not have been invited to so famous a forum.

Something made it worth listening to.

It was a new way to think about God.

They knew a lot about Gods, or idols, or let’s say – things to worship – things to fear and revere.

And, they had their superstitious side.

Is that really all that different than we are today?

Remember a week or so ago?

The builders of the new Yankee Stadium spent five hours and about \$50,000
digging through two feet of concrete a few weeks ago for what?

To extract a Red Sox jersey that had been secretly buried
in the concrete floor of the visiting team’s dug out.

It seems that a construction worker, described as an “unrepentant Red Sox fan,”
had slipped the jersey into the concrete. He wanted to permanently “jinx” the new Yankee stadium.

The story came to light because another construction worker had seen the shirt go into the slab.

He got worried and confessed. He said,

“I don’t want to be responsible for sinking the franchise.”

The building of this stadium was brought to a screeching halt
because it was thought to be endangered by a piece of cloth.

The great ending is that the jersey was auctioned off for charity
and netted a big sum for pediatric cancer research.

It is just to say that superstition is probably as much alive as ever.

But science has certainly come a long way -
genetic engineering, and robotics, nano-technology.

Nano-technology is constructing tiny mechanisms that can make repairs inside the cells of our bodies.

We have described all of the genes that make up a human being in the human genome project.

We have no shortage of learning - nor did they at their time in history.

But we still question, and we still look for the thread that runs through this universe,
Physicists search for a Grand Unified Theory or a Theory of Everything.

Some call these things the “holy grail” of physics today.

So, we still look for something.

Paul had found something.

And Paul tries to put in words his encounter with Christ.

One way to share the idea that Paul was trying to introduce to them
is with a story written in the 19th century by Edwin Abbot.

It is an allegory called *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*.

Anybody read it?

A three dimensional being, in this case a sphere, has created a two-dimensional world.

He calls that world “Flatland.”

The challenge is this.

How can the three-dimensional sphere communicate with the inhabitants of Flatland?

How does something with length and width and height connect to something
in a world with only length and width– no height?

So, in Flatland, there is no up, and there is no down.
Instead of a sky with sunlight shining “down” there is simply light filtering in from the sides.

Get the picture?

The inhabitants of Flatland are distinguished by their edges. They have no height, no volume.
The only way to tell a circle from a square from a triangle from a straight line is from a kind of shadow
where their lines bend to create their unique shapes.

So how would you tell one Flatlander from another?

Only the length of the line - or the angles – or the slight shadow of the curved line.

So this three-dimensional creator of this two-dimensional world called Flatland wants to be known.

How can that happen?

The three-dimensional being will have to give up its three-dimensional existence to become
a two dimensional circle.

Only when the sphere takes on that two-dimensional form will the Flatlanders
be able even to see it - or learn anything about the sphere.

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This is an allegory for Christian faith. The sphere is Jesus Christ –
or what we would call Logos, or the Divine, the creator, the incarnation - God.
We are Flatlanders. We ache to understand more but we cannot see beyond our three dimensions.

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Paul did not use this allegory, or this language,
but this was the idea he was trying to share.
He wanted to coax them out of their assumptions, their superstitions, their magical thinking
that resulted in one idol after another –
to encourage them to think of what they were missing.

What were they missing?

They were missing a connection on a personal level that Paul now knew.

What he experienced went beyond his intellectual understanding.
God is close, as close as breath, and intimately involved in our lives.

Paul saw God as omnipotent, in charge of everything, and many of us would not say that today.
But we would say that all things must be connected – for even science is leading us that way.

We take three dimensions for granted –
and our mathematicians and physicists tell us there may be many more.

But, if we go back to the allegory, Flatlanders cannot conceive anything beyond two dimensions.

And they were the Flatlanders that day, and Paul had seen the sphere
and he wanted to tell them about it.

And yet, it is an allegory – just a way to think about – not a way to know fully at all.
God is more than we can ever imagine.

Paul was trying to talk about
that inner yearning they had – we all have - for something more.
And perhaps they were addressing that yearning their altar to an *unknown* God.
They were very religious, but they were still searching.

I will share one more image: And that is the loggerhead turtle.¹
Loggerhead turtles climb out of the water and onto the beach to lay their eggs.
They dig down with their back flippers about a foot and lay about 100 eggs.
Then they make their way back into the ocean.
When the eggs begin to hatch, the little turtles must dig their way up through the sand
and struggle along the beach to get back to the ocean.
They need the waves that wash upon the sand to take them back to the sea.
If they go the wrong way, or become bound up in debris or danger, they die.
But if they find the water, they can live over 100 years and weigh over 600 pounds.
If a little turtle gets sidetracked, gets disoriented, it will never make it to the ocean.
They need the waves that wash upon the sand to take them back to the sea.
Jesus Christ is that wave.

Now, we all know that Paul's way of telling it was very different.
Religion is about striving for God, and then living a lifestyle that helps us remember that.

What Paul wanted the Athenians to know – the big idea he was proposing on this famous forum was that Christ was a way God was reaching out to us.

For like the Flatlanders in Edwin Abbot's allegory
who were unable to see in three dimensions
and the baby turtle who moves up through the sand and tries to find the ocean -
we are looking for something that is also looking for us.

We don't have the words – we have to use the ones we have.

We don't have the imagination to help us think big enough.

But Jesus and his life manifested it.

We might ask, "Is he the only one?"

I would say, "No."

Were we to study deeply some other religious and spiritual traditions
we would surely learn more about how we are connected or sought out by a greater purpose.
whom we call God.

So, what did the Athenians do and how did they respond?

Some believed, some were curious, and some went away uninterested. Just like today.

Some lives were changed and some were not. That is all up to us.

I will close with an old Hasidic tale
in which the student asks the rabbi why the Torah asks us to
"place these words upon your hearts" rather than in our hearts.
The rabbi answered: "because God knows that our hearts are closed,
and so we cannot place holy words in our hearts.
Instead, we place the words on top of our hearts, where they stay until one day,
when the heart breaks, the words fall in."

Paul was talking about the time for him that the words fell into his heart
and he wanted to share that with those who would listen.

Paul told his story many times. If he had not done so, we would not be here.

May we give thanks for Paul, his story, his work, and may it enrich your own.

So Religious – based on Acts 17:22-31
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¹ <http://www.turtletime.org/>