

Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World, Part 5:
From the Areopagus to Aerospace
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May 21, 2023

Scripture: Acts 17:22-34

This series is based on the premise that when Jesus tells his disciples in John 14:6 that “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me,” he is not talking about a person, or even a religion that connects people to God, but a Way of Life. A Way of Life that Jesus constantly taught and embodied that he lived and died for.

I have called this a 4G Way of Life that connects us to a 5G God. Do you remember the G’s?

The first three are the **3 Great Loves**: Love of God, Neighbor, and Self, which Jesus said sums up “all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 22:40) In Jesus’s conception, these three loves must be lived simultaneously, as a whole. No settling for “two outta three ain’t bad.” If you’re going to love only God and yourself and not your neighbor, for instance, you’ll find it quite hard to connect with God.

Yet, Jesus also knew that we human beings live fractured lives. Have you ever tried to make sure that every action you take is an expression or outgrowth of your love for God, your neighbor, and yourself? If this were all so easy, God never would have needed to send Jesus to us.

No, Jesus did not just teach and embody the 3G’s, but he also taught and embodied a **4th G: Grace**. Giving and receiving Grace is part of what connects us to God. After all, we need grace to stand in for us when don’t practice the 3Gs as we should. If you refuse to receive God’s grace, therefore, preferring to stand or fall by your own righteousness, lots of luck with that! Or, if you choose to receive God’s grace, yet refuse to give to others as you have received, you’ll also have a hard time maintaining a connection with God. What person in your experience has ever been full of God, yet lacking in grace, or graciousness?

It’s not that God won’t love us if we fail to practice the 4G Way of Life. In fact, when we truly wake up to this Way of Life and begin to practice it in earnest, it becomes abundantly clear that God loved and cared for us long before we had ever lifted a finger to follow in God’s Way. The longer we practice a 4G Way of Life, it also becomes abundantly clear that, when we fail to maintain our connection with God, God continues to maintain a connection with us. Thus, when we fall on our faces, as we regularly do, God is there, ever-ready to receive us again and show us a better way. Repentance is always met with acceptance.

Often, it is the receiving of some amazing shot of Grace that awakens us to God’s Presence to begin with. During the course of our lives we sense that there was more to life than meets the eye; that there is a hidden love behind every rock, tree, drop of water, and ray of light within Creation. And we sense that we are a part of this love, both as its object and its subject. Somehow, some way, God is connected to us. Like a loving Parent, God has brought us into the world and nurtured us here. And God seeks ever greater presence in the heart of our hearts, where the waters of our souls are perfectly still, perfectly at peace.

This **G**reat Awakening is the **5th G**. The choice is ours, though, whether or not to accept the experience and maintain the connection through practicing the 4G Way of Life, or to pretend like the Great Awakening never happened. Plenty of people, once awakened, shrink away in fear, afraid that if they were to receive this love most fully, they might lose their identity, or be led to places they would not choose for themselves.

Many of us live our lives flitting back and forth between attraction and repulsion to this 5G God. In fact, I have yet to find any church, no matter how faithful, that does not spend a great deal of its time, energy, and resources flitting back and forth between welcoming the Holy Spirit and chasing Her away.

Curiously, the closest I've come to experiencing the community that is full-on into receiving the Holy Spirit and living the 4G Way of Life was at Gandhi's ashram in January! I don't mean to imply that they are perfect. They're just fully committed. They've jumped into the deep waters with both feet.

But today's subject is not Gandhi or his ashram. It's the apostle Paul. If Jesus truly did teach a 4G Way of Life that connects us with a 5G God, as I am claiming, then even though the terms 4G/5G may be new to us, we should be able to look back and find examples of what I am talking about in the earliest beginnings of Christianity. Paul provides us just such an example.

Curiously, Paul also provides us a glimpse of what it means to express one's Christian faith to others in inclusive terms rather than exclusive ones, as well. Do you remember the little game we played to ferret out the difference between inclusive and exclusive identity a couple weeks ago?

To recall: An exclusive faith identity is where one believes their faith to be the "M" in the series 3 3 3 M 3. This kind of identity says, "My God is entirely different than yours. My faith is the only true faith."

On the other hand, an inclusive faith identity is like the "abcde" in the series: *a ab abc abcd abcde*. Here, "abcde" is more distinct than the others because it includes more of the possibilities than any other set does. In other words, the more an inclusive faith shares with others, the more distinct it becomes.

Let's turn to our passage from Acts 17, looking for how Paul expresses a 4G faith in a 5G God, and how he does so inclusively rather than exclusively.

When Paul stood on the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, in Athens, he had been invited there to share his faith with two groups of people, representing two different ancient faiths that are no longer organized religions: Epicureans and Stoics. Knowing a little about these two faiths dramatically increases our understanding of Paul's basic approach to sharing faith with others.

The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus, who came to Athens in 307 BCE. There he built a house with a garden, and started a gathering known originally as "The Garden." He was a genius with an unusual belief system for his day.

For instance, Epicurus believed that everything around us can be reduced to smaller and smaller pieces until they are so small we can't see them. These unseen bits of matter, Epicurus believed, are the foundation of everything in the Universe. He called them atoms. Yes, atoms. In 307 BCE!

With respect to religion, Epicurus railed against what he saw as the ruinously superstitious tendencies of the Athenian populous. It seemed to him that they were forever walking around with eyes darting nervously up to the heavens in case some god were to take offence at some transgression and whack them for it. We need not fear the gods, he taught. Since everything is made of atoms, the gods also must be made of atoms, and thus are material beings. And, since we can't physically see the gods, either they don't actually exist or they live so far away that they can't possibly be concerned with the likes of us.

According to Epicurus, since everything has a material basis and we have no need to fear the gods, he maintained that the ultimate goal of life should not be pleasing the gods but pleasing the body. Thus, for instance, enjoying a well-prepared meal with friends ranked high on Epicurus' list of goals. To this day, connoisseurs of fine foods are called Epicureans.

While Epicurus saw physical pleasure as the ultimate goal in life, he was no hedonist. Nor was he a sex fiend or glutton. In fact, it was Epicurus who coined the phrase, "Everything in moderation." He wisely understood that if you overindulge in anything, it turns negative and works against the intended result.

If we were to view Epicureanism from the standpoint of the 4G faith that Jesus taught, you could argue that Epicurus taught and embodied at least 2 of the 4Gs. Since Epicurus did not believe in such a being as God, so he believed that happiness boiled down to just two Great Loves: Love of Self, and arguably, Love of Neighbor (since it's hard to enjoy a good meal or the other pleasures of life alone). Love of God, or receiving the Grace that comes from God weren't part of the picture.

The Stoics were different. Founded by a man named Zeno around the same time as the Epicureans, they would gather for conversation at a certain portico (Greek: *stoa*) in the Athens marketplace.

In contrast to the Epicureans, the Stoics did believe there was an unseen, spiritual side to life. Contrary to the polytheistic beliefs of most Athenians, the Stoics believed in only one true God who is the ground and source of all things.

Stoics also believed in something they called God's *Logos*. According to Zeno, God's *Logos* is God's will or intention, which is made manifest in nature (This Stoic term was later imported into Christianity with a slightly altered meaning). The Stoics therefore looked to nature much as an admirer of fine art would examine a painting endeavoring to "hear" the message of its creator revealed in her brushstrokes. They sought to live a simple, uncluttered life, focused on cultivating the intellect and developing the inner power of discernment necessary to grasp God's *Logos*. Above all the Stoics sought to attain virtue, which they understood as doing God's will as expressed through the *Logos*.

While the Stoics did teach about respect for God, neighbor, and self, they believed that God is more of an impersonal principle or energy in the universe. Thus, they did not seek to love God, so much as respect God, as well as our neighbor and ourselves. If we count respect as a form of love, even if a bit watered down, then we could say that the Stoics taught and practiced at least some version of the Three Great Loves.

Yet, the Stoics did not hold a concept of the 4th G: Grace – certainly not the kind of Grace that Jesus taught and embodied. The kind of Grace that Jesus revealed is highly personal, like that of

a Parent, and is offered by a Parent God who is not only personally aware of us, but loves us beyond our wildest imagination. It is hard to receive Grace from a principle, or impersonal “power of life.”

To sum up, the Epicureans taught 2 of the 4Gs. The Stoics taught 3 of them. Neither lasted as organized religions or schools of thought much longer than a couple centuries beyond Paul. Apparently, that 4th G is pretty important. In fact, all of the perennial traditions of the world, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, and even Buddhism teach and practice some concept of Grace, even as it takes different forms.

So, how did Paul share his faith with these Epicureans and Stoics? Did he tell them, “You are only connected to God if you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?”

You may have guessed that the answer is “No!” In fact, the first three ways Paul chooses to share his faith are to affirm the common ground they share. Says Paul:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. 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.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22-23)

If you get nothing else from this sermon, remember this: Paul is a rabbi who believes strongly in the first and second commandments – that is, you worship only one God and you do not make images or idols. Yet Athens was full of temples to different gods, and their associated images and idols. Despite Paul’s misgivings – or even revulsion – concerning Athenian spirituality, Paul has just spent the last several days wandering around Athens until he finally comes upon *the one object of devotion he can personally affirm*. An altar dedicated to a God they freely acknowledge they have not yet become aware of.

The second move Paul makes is to affirm the common ground they share through *proclaiming what he and his audience mutually do not believe*. Paul declares:

The God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything . . . (Acts 17:24-25a).

This statement would have resonated fully with both the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Epicureans would have thought, “You bet. There is no divine presence in shrines. If you can’t see God, there is no God.” The Stoics would be thinking, “God is everywhere, so of course God can’t be contained in mere shrines. And surely, as the Creator of everything, God does not need anything from us.”

The third move Paul makes is to affirm their common ground through **proclaiming what he and his audience mutually do believe**. Paul asserts that the God he believes in is a single God who created all things and who is everywhere present. He further asserts that it is possible to connect with this God, for God

is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’ (Acts 17:26-29).

Here, Paul is especially resonating with the Stoics who, (a) believe in only one God, who is (b) the Creator of everything and is (c) everywhere present and therefore (d) can be sought and found by the devoted. In support of his claims, Paul does not cite his own scriptures, but *Stoic poets and philosophers!*¹

Do you see what's going on? In contrast to many modern evangelists who can't wait to cite Scripture and proclaim Jesus to non-Christians, who believe that no other revelation exists outside Christianity, the first three things Paul does is (1) affirm common ground; (2) affirm common ground; and (3) affirm common ground.

Only after affirming their profound commonalities does Paul address the "2G" Epicureans and "3G" Stoics, in a way that suggests that his faith contains more of the possibilities than the others do. Paul shares about the 4th G: Grace.

Specifically, Paul speaks of the Grace shown in a God who will eventually set the whole world right through judgment "by a man whom God has appointed." Of course, Paul is speaking of Jesus. How might Jesus set the whole world right through becoming our judge? Jesus already indicated how he would judge the world when prayed from the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In other words, the judgment that will set the world right will come through people receiving a judgment of *forgiveness!*

I do not know any more amazing Grace than is demonstrated by Christ on the Cross. Yet, I don't know any other form of Grace would be as effective at setting my own heart right with God than this.

Even today, we find this kind of love and grace a bit too good to be true. Imagine the reaction of the Stoics and Epicureans! Yet Paul insists that it is true. "Of this God has given assurance to all," says Paul, "by raising Jesus from the dead."

In response to this claim, Luke tells us that "some scoffed." Yet apparently some experienced the 5th G through Paul's testimony: Great Awakening. What Paul said rocked their world and enlarged it. Likely, these were people who had already experienced God's amazing Grace sometime in their lives, but never had any words to describe it, or a belief system in which to interpret it. Perhaps the Grace they had already experienced was enough affirmation. "We will hear you again about this," they said.

That day, says Luke, some people became believers without needing to hear more. Among them was a woman named Damaris, and a man named Dionysius the Areopagite.

How about you? Have you experienced the Grace we've been talking about in some way? If so, have you received it deeply enough to stop flitting back and forth between attraction and repulsion and claim Way of Life that the Holy Spirit invites you into for yourself?

¹ "In God we live, move, and have our being" is a paraphrase of Seneca. "For we, too, are his offspring" is a quote from Aratus.