

The Unknown God

By David Feddes

If there's one thing about the Christian faith that offends people, it's this: The God of Jesus is too definite. He can be known. And that turns many people off.

Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step groups speak of depending on "God as you understand him," whatever that understanding might be. Any higher power you believe in is okay if it works for you. Twelve-step groups teach that you can't get along without some power beyond yourself, but they don't want to say who or what that power actually is. If your higher power doesn't happen to be Jesus, you'd rather not hear about a God with a definite personality who wants all people to reach out for him and find him. The God of Jesus is too definite. An unknown God is less likely to turn people off.

Joseph Campbell, deceased but still influential, studied myths from many different cultures. Campbell taught that no myths are literally true but that all myths and rituals point to a mysterious force which is beyond knowing. All religions are true as myth, but none are true as fact. Now, if you think this way, you won't want to believe that a certain man really was—and is—the living God, that this man really lived on earth at a definite place and time, that after he was killed his dead body really did spring to life, and that a definite time really has been set when he will return to earth and everyone will answer to him. The God of Jesus is too definite. An unknown God is less troubling.

As long as we have an unknown God, we can adapt him to suit what we want. We don't have to change in accordance with what he wants. We can just do what feels best and "follow our bliss." As long as we have an unknown God, your guess is as good as mine when it comes to religion. When God is unknown, he can be whoever we want him to be, we can be whoever we want to be, and we can be broadminded in our attitude toward all religions.

Vagueness seems to be a virtue in religion. It's awkward when someone comes along who is definite rather than vague. That's why Christianity is often offensive. Nobody minds a vague commemoration of Jesus' death as the martyrdom of a courageous hero. But if I tell you that Jesus' sacrifice is the only way to God, that it's the only way God provides for anyone to be forgiven and enfolded in his love and saved from eternal hell, you may be offended. Nobody minds if the resurrection story is used to remind us of new life in springtime or the joy of fresh beginnings. But if I say that Jesus is really alive, that his resurrection proves he's the one God has appointed to judge the world, that no matter what religion you happen to believe, you'll have to answer to Jesus in the end, you might not like it.

But like it or not, it's the truth. The character of God isn't a big question mark that no one can answer. The character of God is the character of Jesus. The way to be right with God and enjoy his love isn't vague or hidden. The Way to be right with God is Jesus. It's unacceptable to relate to God as though he is unknown. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know how God acts, look at Jesus. If you want to know how God saves, look at Jesus. If you want to know how God will judge, look at Jesus.

This might offend you if you prefer your religion to be vague and think that God is unknowable. You might think that the only thing we can know for sure is that we can't know anything for sure! Oh, and you might also feel sure about one other thing: God (or the gods or goddesses or whoever) are totally tolerant and all religions are equally valid. But how can you be

unsure about everything else and yet be sure about that? Do you really want to go on with unclear, uncertain ideas of an unknown God?

God is knowable, and any idea that contradicts his revelation in Christ is false. God is knowable, and there's no excuse for not knowing him. God is knowable, and though some might be offended by that, many others will hear God speaking and come to know the great God who made you and loves you.

Maybe you have faith in a vague higher power. You're amazed at the beauty of nature or the wonder of a baby's birth. Certain things have happened in your life that had to be more than a coincidence. Maybe you've even had times where you actually sensed a sort of Presence who seemed awesome and yet nearby. You figure there's got to be some sort of God. You feel drawn to him somehow, you may even meditate and pray and worship him in your own way, but you just don't know him. If that's where you're at right now, there's a story in the Bible that may really connect with you. It addresses worshippers of an unknown God.

Idols and Philosophies

In Acts 17 the Bible tells of a visit the apostle Paul made to the city of Athens. Athens was a marvel. If you or I could have visited Athens back then, we would have been impressed. Intellectuals would admire the world-famous university, where the brightest minds were discussing the latest ideas. Sports fans would flock to the stadium to watch some of the world's best athletes. People who love drama would hurry to see the tragedies and comedies of Greece's dramatic geniuses. Artists and sight-seers would gaze at sculptures and works of art. Everyone would want to see the Parthenon, one of the architectural wonders of the world.

Athens was full of attractions, but when Paul got there, what caught his attention? The idols. Can you believe it? In that splendid, exciting city, Paul kept noticing the idols. And they bothered him. He didn't say to himself, "What a wonderful diversity! All roads lead to God, after all. These people's higher powers seem to make them feel better. Their myths express profound truths. Whatever they believe is true for them." No, Paul "was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). Why was he so upset? Because false religion dishonors God and destroys people.

Paul decided to help the people of Athens to know the one true God revealed in Jesus. He didn't start with the idol worshippers, however. He began in the synagogue with his fellow Jews and with some Greeks there who also worshipped the God of Israel. Paul wanted those who already believed in the one God to know that Jesus is the one in whom all God's promises come true. After speaking in the synagogue, Paul took his message to the street. He talked in the marketplace with whoever happened to be there. Soon he got into a discussion with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

The Epicureans believed that all of reality can be explained in terms of atoms falling randomly through space. There is no divine design. Everything that happens is the result of purely mechanical causes and random events. (Sound familiar? This view of reality is what some people call "modern science," but it's not science, and it's not modern. It's a non-scientific philosophy that's more than 2000 years old.) Epicurus taught that the gods are not to be feared, death is not to be feared, and the best thing in life is to seek your own happiness. Epicurus defined happiness as the absence of pain, and he taught the best way to minimize pain is to avoid extremes in behavior.

Epicurean intellectuals talked in lofty language, but their ideas led to a lifestyle among ordinary people that was anything but lofty. The Epicurean view reduced people to random globs of atoms, with no sense of dignity or destiny. That didn't exactly inspire wisdom, virtue, or heroism. A highbrow like Epicurus said that avoiding extremes would bring the most happiness, but the ordinary people who bought into Epicurean thinking figured, "If we're just bundles of atoms that come together randomly and then fall apart at death, we might as well have a blast while we last. There is no higher purpose than to grab pleasure and avoid pain. Why not do whatever we feel like doing while we have the chance? Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That was the most common result of Epicureanism in the ancient world. And that is still the most common result of seeing people as random results of evolution who have no life beyond death.

The Stoics had a somewhat different outlook. They were pantheists: they believed that God *is* the universe and the universe *is* God. They saw the whole universe as one vast rational being. The Stoics were also fatalists: whatever happens happens, and there's nothing you can do about it. You should learn to accept it without flinching or complaining. The way of the Stoic is to control your desires and emotions and to base everything you do on pure rationality. Nothing should upset you, since God is all, and all is God.

The greatest Stoic of Paul's day was the Roman scholar Seneca. Seneca was renowned for his character and self-control. He also happened to be the tutor of a youth named Nero, who later became emperor, murdered his own mother, played the fiddle while Rome burned, and massacred many Christians. Some Stoics were men of strong principle and high morals, but their view of the world had no power to restrain the utterly immoral actions of a man like Nero. If God is all and all is God, then murdering your mother or fiddling while Rome burns is just a part of the rational, constantly evolving nature of God.

Marketplace of Ideas

At any rate, these were two brands of philosophy Paul encountered in the Athens marketplace.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection (17:18).

These people thought it was ridiculous for Paul to claim that God's being and his activity in the world are focused in a Jew named Jesus. The Epicureans were atheists who believe in no God, while the Stoics were pantheists who believed everything is God. Neither group believed in a personal God at all, let alone a God who would become a man.

Resurrection sounded like utter nonsense to them. The Epicureans based their whole philosophy on the idea that we're random collections of atoms which break up permanently at death. The Stoics believed only in the future of a divine universe that is rationally evolving, not in the future of resurrected individuals. No wonder Paul sounded to them like a babbling promoter of a strange and outlandish religion.

Still, they were curious. They wanted to hear more about these new ideas, so they invited Paul to address the Areopagus, a group of the leading citizens of Athens, and explain his views to them in more detail. The Bible adds this note: "All the Athenians and the foreigners there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21).

That may sound open minded, but it was a case of being so open-minded their brains fell out. The people of Athens claimed to be deep thinkers relying only on their powers of reasoning, but they didn't really *know* anything. All they did was discuss the latest fads. It's ironic that in the name of being rational, they opened the doors for kinds of superstition. Athens was full of idols. Those who stand for nothing end up falling for everything. Rationalism isn't the enemy of superstition. It prepares the way for it. When you trust nothing but your own reasoning, you end up swallowing everything but God's truth.

Things haven't changed much in 2000 years. If I had to summarize in one sentence how a lot of intellectuals tend to behave, I would echo the Bible's words: They spend "their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." It's just a word game. It's curiosity without commitment, discussion without decision. As long as God is unknown, you can spend all your time toying with the latest ideas. But if God is known, the word game is over. You have to make up your mind. If God is known, you have to repent and trust him and obey him.

Paul wanted the people of Athens to realize this. The philosophers exalted various abstract systems, while the common people had gods and goddesses and myths and superstitions running out of their ears. With all the different opinions, nobody knew what to believe, but they still had a spiritual hunger.

Why did the intellectuals dream up their systems? They wanted to make sense of the big picture. Why did ordinary people worship such a variety of gods and goddesses? They wanted some connection between their personal lives and the world of the divine. The rationalism of the philosophers and the superstition of the idol worshippers were both wrong, but they were groping for something to satisfy a powerful spiritual impulse.

Personal Creator

Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because he himself gives life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" (Acts 17:22-28)

Paul made God known as the personal Creator. God is real, he's personal, he's knowable, and he wants us to know him. The universe isn't just atoms falling through space. God made it. The universe isn't itself God. It's God's creation. God himself is personal, and those who say he isn't just don't know what they're talking about. God is one, and those who say there are many different gods are wrong. This one God created the entire universe, he created every person in every place at every point in history, and whether we know it or not, this mighty God is very near to us, and he wants us to know him. Every breath we take is possible only because we live and move and have our being through God's power. Without him we'd vanish instantly.

All people everywhere live in the presence of this very personal Creator. That's why humanity is incurably religious. We can't help asking ultimate questions. All through history, in all places and cultures, people look at the creation around them, they reflect on the profound mysteries of right and wrong, of love and hate, of life and death, and they formulate religions and philosophies that help them make sense of the universe and of their own lives. There are many true ideas in these religious systems, and much moral wisdom, but there are also many errors.

Because every culture creates its own gods and goddesses and traditions, some people contend that one religion is as good as another. They say that all roads lead to God, and each culture should keep its own religion. But multiculturalism of this sort is a deadly lie. It's just not true that worshipping an idol or some vague unknown God is as good as knowing the true God as he reveals himself in Jesus Christ. The Lord doesn't want us dreaming up our own philosophies and worshipping our own homemade gods. The personal Creator made all the people of all places and cultures so that they would seek *him* and reach out for *him* and find *him*.

Resurrected Savior

Therefore [Paul said] since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:29-31).

That's where Paul lays it all on the line. God isn't some vague unknown. God isn't a product of "man's design and skill," a figment of our imagination. He's not whatever we imagine him to be—he's who he reveals himself to be. There may have been a time when God overlooked all that idolatry and superstition and error, but with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that time is over. Now God calls people in every part of the world to acknowledge him. Don't just follow your own cultural religion or your own ideas. God "commands all people everywhere to repent."

God isn't some vague unknown. Of course he's too great and infinite for us to know everything about him, but we can still know him truly, if not completely. We can know God as the Creator of all things, including you and me. We can know God in the person of the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ. God's character isn't a vague unknown. It is clearly revealed in the character of Jesus. Christ is the image of the invisible God. Our relationship to God and our final destiny isn't a vague unknown. Everything is leading up to a definite day, set by God, when we will face a definite judge, appointed by God, and all this, says Paul, has been revealed in a definite event accomplished by God: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And this calls for a definite response: Repent and believe the good news of God's reign and salvation in Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is not just a myth containing some good lessons. It is a fact, the central fact of the universe.

The good news of the personal Creator and resurrected Savior turns some people off. The gospel sounds too definite and dogmatic when it declares: "This is who God is. This is what he has done. This is what determines your destiny. This is how you must respond." Acts 17:32 describes the reaction to Paul's message in Athens. "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject,'"

and several became believers. Those are the two basic reactions when the unknown God is made known. Some people sneer. Others believe and are saved.

What's your response?

If Jesus never rose from the dead, you can forget about him. He's not God's Son, he's a phony. His life doesn't reveal God, his death doesn't pay for your sins, and he's not coming again to judge the living and the dead.

But, if Jesus did rise from the dead, you'd better repent and believe in him. Say goodbye to the unknown God, say goodbye to every abstract philosophy, say goodbye to every other form of religion. Ask God to forgive you and fill your life with his Holy Spirit. Get to know God better by getting to know Jesus better. Find a church that proclaims Jesus as the Bible reveals him.

These are the choices: either forget Jesus, or follow Jesus. I pray that you'll start following him today, that you'll realize that the unknown God has made himself known, that the God you've been trying to find has found you, that he loves you with an everlasting love, and that he adopts you as his very own child through faith in Jesus.