

May 21, 2017  
Acts 17:22-31  
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## **“Cloud of Unknowing”**

**In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, an allegory by C.S. Lewis, Susan and Lucy are getting ready to meet Aslan the lion, who represents Christ. Two talking animals, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, prepare the children for the encounter. "Ooh," said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie." said Mrs. Beaver. "And make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."**

**"Then isn't he safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"**

**If you have read the Narnia series by C. S. Lewis, you know that the lion, Aslan, is grand and noble, good and kind. And alive! Not at all like the gods of the Athenians.**

**Before coming to Athens, Paul had been to Philippi, where his ability to stir things up got him and Silas thrown in jail. Through a miraculous escape, the believers whisked Paul away first to Thessalonica and then to Berea to keep him safe. By the time he got to Athens, for expediency he was keeping a lower profile, waiting for Silas and Timothy to catch up with him.**

**Some would say that Athens was the most glorious city in the world in terms of architecture and history. It was the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire. Besides being the cradle of democracy, it had everything -- outstanding temples, artwork, sculptures, orators. It was known for its mathematicians,**

philosophers, and astronomers -- namely, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Athens was also a very religious center. In comparison to 10,000 people living there, there were 30,000 idols, a ratio of 3:1. The Acropolis was a hill within the city, on which sat the Parthenon. Just beyond the Parthenon was a rock 30 to 40 feet high called the Areopagus from which you get a breathtaking view of the city below. After conversations with people in the marketplace, Paul was invited here to speak to a diverse and curious crowd.

Aware of his audience's preferences and prejudices, Paul began by praising them for their spiritual curiosity and wide-ranging search for religious truth. "I've noticed," said Paul, "that you are very religious, with gods positioned all over the city. I also noticed one that says "To the Unknown God," just in case you missed a deity you don't know about yet. Let me tell you about that God so you can worship him intelligently." Paul knows that even nonbelieving pagans can see God in part through creation and the laws of natural order. These Athenians have felt the divine presence when studying the orderly assembly of heaven and earth, but attempted to capture and tame that divinity in the form of idols. Paul wants them to know that God is alive and active within this world. We are created with a desire to know God, and when we seek God, God can be found. <sup>1</sup>

Finally, Paul presents his conclusion, risking rejection by the Athenians. What makes belief in this God different is that it is no longer within our control -- it requires a leap of faith. The crux of Paul's message to the Athenians was Jesus and the resurrection. God in his power defied death. Jesus who died is alive!

Paul's sermon brought a mixed reaction. Some outright rejected him, some mocked him, others were interested in hearing more, and a few joined him and believed.

Two word pictures from the Acts 17 passage grabbed my attention.

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<sup>1</sup> The World's Saving Gesture: The Line and the Circle, [www.homileticonline.com](http://www.homileticonline.com)

- Referring to the many idols, Paul says: “God . . . does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything . . . “
- Paul says, God created us with an innate desire for God, “so that [we] would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him -- though indeed he is not far from each one of us.”

In essence, I think the two together say, “God doesn’t need us to make him God; God made us to need him.”

Reference to “the unknown God” brings to mind a classic I studied at Shalem Institute of Spiritual Formation. The book is titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It was written by an *unknown* fourteenth century mystic about the soul’s quest for God.

There was a time if asked who God is, my automatic answer would have been, “God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent -- that is all-knowing, all-powerful and all-present.” I remember being challenged by my brother-in-law about whether God is all-knowing. He argued that a God who gives us choice can’t know what choices we will make in the future, or it really isn’t choice. I argued that even if God gave us day-to-day choice, God could know the long range outcome. I acknowledge there is a lot about God that I don’t understand. I have come to see our relationship with God as more important than our knowledge about God. It’s kind of the same as, “God doesn’t need us to make him God; God made us to need him.”

Speaking of the “cloud of unknowing,” there are some questions that even we, born and raised in the church, may rightfully ponder. How much does God know about the future? Is God in control? Does God have a perfect plan for each person?

I read an interesting article by the author of *The Shack* called “Lie #3: God is in control.” We are control freaks who want to control everything around us so the things we fear won’t happen. Young says, “Control is a myth. We know that one rogue cell or another person’s choices can change the direction of our lives.” Something goes horribly wrong, like when a car crosses the road in front of a motorcycle and the motorcyclist is killed.” Even though well intentioned and perhaps reassuring, it feels crass to say, “It must be

part of God's plan" or "God must know what he's doing." Young says, "Yes, God has the creative audacity to build purpose out of the evil we generate, but that will never justify what is wrong."<sup>2</sup>

Listen to Young's logic here. "Does God have a wonderful plan for our lives . . . a perfect plan that requires a perfect response? . . . What if this is about a God who has greater respect for you than for "the plan"? What if there is no "plan" for your life but rather a relationship in which God constantly invites us to co-create, respectfully submitting to the choices we bring to the table? . . . A true Creator knows he not only has to shape, but also endorse and allow. Wisdom allows things to grow and unfold. Love and relationship trump control every time. Forced love is no love at all."<sup>3</sup>

How does that strike you? What I would like you to think about is, what would shake your belief in God? If God can't know the future or isn't in complete control or doesn't have a perfect plan for us because he chose to give us freedom of choice, would that change or threaten your faith? Perhaps there are some expectations about God that we need to hold lightly. Our relationship with God is in progress, and we continue to learn. What Paul wanted the Athenians to know is it's all about "Christ and the power of his resurrection. Christ is alive!"

A favorite hymn acknowledges we don't know everything, but affirms "I know WHOM I have believed."

I know not why God's wondrous grace  
To me He hath made known,  
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love  
Redeemed me for His own.

But I know whom I have believed  
And am persuaded that he is able  
To keep that which I've committed  
Unto him against that day.

I know not how this saving grace  
To me he did impart.  
Nor how believing in his word  
Wrought peace within my heart.

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<sup>2</sup> William Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, "Lie #3: God is in control," <http://wmpaulyoung.com/god-is-in-control/>

<sup>3</sup> William Paul Young

**I would encourage us to:**

- **keep pondering who God is (“if you seek me you will find me”),**
- **hold lightly what we don’t understand (“God is not served by human hands”)**
- **and allow God to be God (“in him we live and move and have our being”)**

**Paul admonishes us in Colossians 1:10, “Lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” Amen.**