

ETHNIC BLENDS **MARK DEYMAZ**

# Cross-Cultural **Across the Street**

**I**n the 21st century, individuals and churches seeking to advance the Gospel in an increasingly diverse and cynical society need to intentionally pursue cross-cultural competence to be effective. To be clear, I'm not thinking only of those willing to cross an ocean, but of the many more now willing to cross the street. We must learn to adapt our message to various people in various settings without compromising our theology. Thankfully Scripture provides both incentive and instruction to help us do this.

## **Paul's Example in Athens**

In Acts 17:16–34, Paul displays a high capacity for overcoming the obstacles of cross-cultural outreach.

While waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, Paul *observes* that the city is full of idols. He also observes an altar inscribed, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” Paul then uses these observations to his advantage: “What you worship in ignorance,” he tells the diverse people of Athens—Jews, God-fearers, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers alike—“[is] the God who made the world and all things in it . . . [the] Lord of heaven and earth, [who] does not dwell in temples made with hands . . . [He] gives to all people life and breath . . . and He made from one man every nation of mankind. . . [Therefore] God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.”

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Note, too, that in his interaction with the Athenians, Paul **focuses on shared points of connection and common ground** rather than denouncing false, culture-bound, expressions of faith. He also **demonstrates understanding and respect for their culture**, that is, the fact that they, too, are religious; and he speaks to their belief in an unknown god by leveraging the inscription mentioned above. In so doing, he **presents the Gospel incarnationally**—that is, *through* the culture not *to* the culture, giving no cause for offense. His approach in no way compromised his beliefs. Rather, it provoked increased curiosity among even the most skeptical in Athens and a desire to hear from

him again. More significantly, some were saved.

## **Paul's Comment to the Corinthians**

By his own admission, Paul is intentional in his pursuit of cross-cultural competence for the sake of the Gospel. For as he later writes to the Corinthians:

“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; . . . to those who are without law, as without law, . . . so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:19–22).

Is it any wonder he was able to share the message of Christ effectively “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16)? We, too, can reach diverse others when we follow these five principles mined from his example:

1. **Be intentional** in your pursuit of cross-cultural competence.
2. **Make observations** and learn what you can about diverse others in advance of personal engagement.
3. **Focus your initial interaction** on shared points of connection and common ground.
4. **Demonstrate understanding** and respect for another's culture.
5. **Present the Gospel** through a culture, not to a culture.

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