

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** Disciples, on the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

### **The Fine Art of [People] Exegesis**

Study #21

(Acts 17)

#### **Introduction: Finding meaning by diligent study...**

One day, when my younger son, Zach, was about ten years old, he walked into my study and was looking at my desk. He saw an open book, picked it up and said, “Wow (actually, he might have said, “Yucch!”), *what is this?*”.

He was looking at my opened Greek New Testament. I was fiddling with a bit of exegesis.

I graduated from Dallas Seminary with a major in New Testament literature. So, I studied Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, a lot.

Those classes, along with others in Hebrew (for the Old Testament) helped equip me to exegete the Scriptures.

The word *exegesis* refers to the art of drawing the meaning out of a literary text.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term is almost always used with respect to religious literature - Christian, Jewish, or otherwise. The antonym is “eisegesis”, which refers to the practice of reading the reader’s own preconceived ideas *into* a text.

The work of exegesis will always involve research into historical backgrounds and cultural context. The exegete will study vocabulary and grammar. Study of the original languages is helpful in exegeting a biblical text.

Today, you can judge whether my exegetical work over the past week has been true or not, as we turn to Acts, chapter 17.

But this morning, the Apostle Paul will tell us that exegetical work can be applied to subjects other than the Bible.

To “exegete” a passage of the Bible is to “draw out” its meaning by diligent study. Well, Paul was an expert exegete - of biblical texts AND of people. We discover today that loving people to Jesus requires diligent study, too.

*Review and preview...*

We are coming to the end of our time in Acts. We’ll take one or two more runs at major passages. But then, we’re going to look at themes running through Acts that speak very powerfully to the season in which we, here at Northwest, find ourselves.

Last week, we watched as Paul and Silas began the church’s Second Missionary Journey.

In the city of Philippi, they enjoyed great success *and* encountered great adversity.

The Jewish household of Lydia and the Gentile household of the Philippian jailer were saved by grace through faith in Jesus. Paul and Silas proved that it’s possible to pray and to sing hymns of praise to God while in prison with feet in stocks.

When the team of Paul and Silas - plus Timothy and Luke - left Philippi, they followed the coastline of Macedonia, traveling south and west for about a hundred miles, exegeting as they went...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> How did Paul make ends meet? Philippians 4:15-16 tells us that the church in Philippi sent money to support him (and Silas) as they continued the Second

## Exegeting Thessalonica (vv. 1-9)

### Receptivity from the Synagogue! (vv. 1-4)

*Arrival in Thessalonica (v. 1)*

***[1] Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.***

Unlike Philippi, Thessalonica had a population of Jews sufficient to support a synagogue.<sup>3</sup> So, the team first went there to share the Gospel of Jesus.

*The message to the Jews (vv. 2-3)*

***[2] And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths<sup>4</sup> reasoned with them from the Scriptures***

Paul interacted with these Thessalonian Jews with whom he had so much in common. They were all Jews. They all accepted the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. They had shared worldviews.

During those first three Sabbaths, Paul would have shown them Bible passages that clearly said that the Messiah, when He came, would ***[3]...“suffer and rise again from the dead.”***

This would have been a radical thought for the Jews, who previously had only paid attention to the texts that talked of the Messiah conquering and ruling, not suffering and dying.

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Missionary Journey. Plus, we also know that Paul sometimes worked, supporting himself by making tents (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 3:7-10; Acts 18:1-3).

<sup>3</sup> That would be ten Jewish men. Philippi's Jewish population was so small that it did not have a synagogue.

<sup>4</sup> This doesn't mean that Paul only stayed in Thessalonica for three weeks. Only that he ministered specifically to the Jews for three weeks. He probably continued in the city, serving both Gentiles and Jews, for a somewhat longer time.

But, it was all there. The prophets Isaiah and Zechariah and others said so. Paul told them, ***[3b]... “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”***

And just listen to the response of the Bible-believing Jews to this teaching.

*The response of the Jews (v. 4)*

***[4] And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and several of the leading women.***

Paul spoke to these folks in a way that they could understand, and the message clicked. He had exegeted the Scriptures *and* his audience brilliantly. They were Bible-believing people and he spoke to them from the Bible.

So, Gospel ministry got off to a great start in Thessalonica, just as it had in Philippi.

Unfortunately, just as problems had developed in Philippi, so it happened in Thessalonica, too.

### Opposition from the Synagogue (vv. 5-9)

*Another city, another mob scene! (v. 5)*

Some members of the synagogue were so jealous of the following that Paul and Silas were winning, that they took ***[5a]...along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.***

Opposition, of any kind, isn't much fun. But can you imagine how terrifying it would be to be the object of a mob's fury?!

Picture yourself being the target of an approaching mob. They are out to do you harm - talk about terrifying!

When this mob heard that Paul and Silas had been staying in the home of a new convert named Jason, they marched over to his house, and **[5b]...attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them** (Paul and Silas) **out to the people.**

Now, fortunately for Paul and Silas, they weren't at Jason's home when the mob came calling. Unfortunately for Jason, he was home. And, Jason was treated in his own hometown of Thessalonica just as Paul and Silas had been treated in Philippi.

*Sorry, Jason... (vv. 6-9)*

They dragged Jason and some others who had believed before the city officials<sup>5</sup> and accused them of siding with Paul and Silas who **[6] have upset the world.**

And, yes, Christians do turn the world on its ear by pointing to Jesus for forgiveness of sins and abundant life. We do follow “**decrees**” (v. 7) that are different than those of Rome or Washington or Austin. We are lovingly subversive in that we give primary allegiance to King Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

So, we're not terribly surprised that Paul and his friends brought commotion to Thessalonica.

*Sorry, Jason... (vv. 8-9)*

**[8] They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. [9] And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others,<sup>7</sup> they released them.**

After this riot, Paul and Silas concluded that their time of productive ministry in Thessalonica was over.<sup>8</sup>

So, they were sent out of town (**[10] by night**) by the church, traveled about fifty miles southwest, and came to the mountain city of Berea.<sup>9</sup>

### **Exegeting Berea (vv. 10-15)**

#### **Receptivity from the Synagogue (again) (vv. 10-13)**

*GREAT response! (vv. 10-12)*

**[10] The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.**

Different city, same strategy. Wherever there was a Jewish synagogue, they went there first.

And as wonderful as the initial reception was in Thessalonica, it was even more positive in Berea.

**[11] Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.**

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<sup>5</sup> Thessalonica was a “free city”, which meant it was sovereign with respect to its local and internal affairs and not subject to provincial administration.

<sup>6</sup> It may be tempting to think that the early disciples were not doing anything to bring this mistreatment upon themselves. They were. They were so boldly proclaiming Jesus that they were upsetting powerful people and challenging the status quo.

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<sup>7</sup> This may have been a pledge that Paul would leave, never to return to the city of Thessalonica. (1 Thess. 2:18)

<sup>8</sup> We gather from the Thessalonian epistles, though, that despite the troubles Paul and Silas had, the believers in that city continued to boldly proclaim the Gospel.

<sup>9</sup> Berea was located in a province that corresponds to southern Greece today. We don't know if Timothy went with Paul and Silas, or joined them later at Berea.

Paul exegeted his audience, saw that they were wholly convinced of the authority of Scripture, and went right to work, exegeting the Scriptures for the Bereans.

The Bereans wondered if it was possible that Jesus - a Man who suffered death on a Roman cross - could be the Messiah. To find out, they did their own exegetical work to see if Paul's exegesis was sound.

If they could be convinced ON THE BASIS OF SCRIPTURE that the Messiah would suffer and be raised from the dead, then they would be open to placing their trust in Jesus.

Well sure enough, they found that to be the case. And the result of their careful inquiry was that **[12]...many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.**

Great response! And then (again!), here comes trouble.<sup>10</sup>

*Great opposition (v. 13)*

**[13] But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.**

The last time an imported mob had opposed Paul (in the city of Lystra), he had been stoned nearly to death. So, the Berean Christians sent Paul packing.

### **Escape Under Cover of Night (vv. 14-15)**

**[14] Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. [15] Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.**

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<sup>10</sup> Trouble followed Paul and Barnabas on the First Missionary Journey when Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium came to stir up trouble in Lystra. The same things happen here.

Athens. For centuries, Athens' architecture, academics, politics and art had been a showcase for all that was glorious about everything Greek.

By the first century, her glory had faded a bit, but Athens was still an influential hub of culture, art, literature, and philosophy.

Paul arrived in Athens alone. He wasn't with a team here. But even without a support crew, once he hit town, he busily went about exegeting.

### **Exegeting Athens (vv. 1-9)**

#### **A Two-Front Engagement (vv. 16-17)**

*Observing*

As Paul toured the city, I'm he no doubt marveled at the beautiful sculpture and art and architecture. While marveling, he also grieved, because everything about the city reflected a lack of understanding about God.

**[16] Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.**

His exegesis of the city and its citizens uncovered great need. So, from the get-go, his ministry in Athens was directed to two separate arenas. As usual, he went to the Jews.

*Engaging*

**[17] So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be present.**

In the synagogue, he used his normal approach. The Jews there had a biblical worldview, so he went about showing from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

But when he went to the market he encountered something else entirely. The “person on the street” in Athens neither knew nor cared what the prophet Isaiah might have written.

In the market place, Paul was not speaking to God-fearing, Bible-believing Jews. He was speaking to polytheists and to intellectuals in love with abstract philosophy.

Among those with whom Paul was engaging were some from two distinct schools of first century philosophical thought.

### **Focus: Paul, to the Greeks (vv. 18-34)**

*Paul and the Athenian philosophers (vv. 18-21)*

***[18a] And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him.***

Please forgive me for doing this. But I’m going to take a minute or two and explain something about Epicurean and Stoic philosophy. You’ll see why, shortly.

#### The Epicureans<sup>11</sup>

In our day, Epicureanism has gotten a bad rap. Today, when we hear “Epicurean” (if we think anything) we think of a sensualist. But that was not at all who the original Epicureans were.

Yes, the early Epicureans believed that the greatest good in life was pleasure. But they believed that pleasure was best arrived at by avoiding excesses.

So, while the “epicurean” lifestyle of 2017 might involve carousing and gluttony, in the first century it was marked by self-control and a life given to as little risk as possible.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> They followed Epicurus, who lived from 341-270 BC.

<sup>12</sup> The ancient Epicurean also believed that if the gods exist - and he wasn’t at all sure that they did - they do not become involved in human events, but were “hands-off” gods.

In addition to talking with Epicureans, Paul also spoke with Stoics.

#### The Stoics

By the time Paul went to Athens, Stoicism had been around for a couple of hundred years. Stoics were pantheists. To them, everything was god.

They also believed that a great *impersonal* PURPOSE was directing history and that people’s main responsibility in life was to align themselves with this PURPOSE.<sup>13</sup>

And just how did these guys view Paul and his message?

#### Their “take” on Paul

***[18b]...Some were saying, ‘What would this idle babbler wish to say?’ Others, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,’-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.***

Some weren’t at all impressed with Paul. Calling him an “*idle babbler*” was no more a compliment in the first century than it would be today.

Some of them also believed that he was polytheistic (“*a proclaimer of strange deities*”). They were probably confused about this, since they knew he was a Jew and that the Jews - poor, limited, small-minded Jews - only believed in one God.

At the same time, Paul’s talk about Jesus’ resurrection would have resonated with well-known Greek myths about gods and goddesses who died and came back to life.<sup>14</sup>

But everybody knew that those myths were just stories. Paul seemed to be claiming that in Jesus the myth came historically true.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Stoics believed that they had successfully so aligned themselves, and were thus, notorious for arrogant pride and self-sufficiency.

<sup>14</sup> Myths like Dionysus and Persephone, for example

These philosophers were constantly tossing new ideas around (see verse 21). And many of the Athenians thought Paul's ideas were a little nutty.

But they must have also thought them pretty interesting, because they invited him to speak at the Areopagus!

"Paul, come to Mars Hill!"

**[19] And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus,<sup>16</sup> saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? [20] "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."**

What an open door! The Areopagus (= Mars Hill) was the most prestigious platform the ancient world had to offer for anyone presenting a new philosophy for consideration.

Here, the platform is offered to the Apostle Paul. He's going to get to present a case for Christianity in Athens, on Mars Hill.

So, what will he say?

We have seen him present Jesus before. He has gone to the Scriptures, argued from the prophets that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again, and then concluded that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah.

That's his presentation when he is in the synagogue. What will he say on Mars Hill?

Remember, Paul was a master exegete. But not only of Scripture. He was also really good at exegeting people. And, having spent some days studying the Athenians, what he had to say to the

most erudite philosophers of his day was dramatically different than the presentation he gave to biblically-centered, God-fearing Jews.

*Paul at the Areopagus (vv. 22-31)*

Introduction (vv. 22-23)

He began winsomely, with a [sort of] compliment.

**[22] So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.**

He recognized that they were very sincere in their reverence of their deities. Sincerity is a fine thing. There's nothing wrong with sincerity. It's commendable and Paul commended it.

But Paul used an interesting word for "religious." It is literally the word "to fear/reverence" coupled with the word for "demons." Paul not-so-subtly says that the Athenians deities were less gods and more anti-gods.<sup>17</sup>

"How did I know that you are so religious? Well, **[23a] "...while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.'"**

The Athenians so feared that they would overlook some important deity that they built and dedicated an altar "To the unknowable god. To the god we don't know. To the god we might have missed."

And it was that inscription that gave Paul the open door he had been looking for. **[23b] "Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."**

Content of message (vv. 24-29)

As he speaks, he is aiming to "connect" with his audience. So, he ties his remarks to the Epicureans and the Stoics.

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<sup>15</sup> This was a major thought of the great Christian thinker, C.S. Lewis. He saw the earlier mythic tales of gods and goddesses resurrecting as a foreshadowing of what God would actually do with His Son, Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> Areopagus = Hill of Ares/Mars. The Areopagus was also the place where the supreme body for judicial and legislative matters in Athens met.

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<sup>17</sup> In other places in ancient Greek literature the word clearly means "superstitious."

He mentions the transcendence of God, which would have prompted a chorus of “AMENS” from the Epicureans.

**[24] “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; [25] nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things...”**

Remember. The Epicureans believed that whatever gods existed were high above human life.

God - if there was such a thing - could not be the kind of Being portrayed by Greek mythology, always getting himself into embarrassing situations. God HAD to be better than that.

Paul says that the only God who really IS is wholly different from what the polytheists call “gods.” And this God can’t be contained in a temple. Images made by human hands don’t do Him justice.<sup>18</sup>

His next words were tailor-made for the Stoics.

Paul affirmed that God, **[26]...made from one man** (that would be Adam) **every nation of mankind<sup>19</sup> to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,**

**[27] that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us...**

God is self-sufficient. He would exist if everything else was destroyed. And, He has made a world with PURPOSE - the main tenet of Stoic philosophy. So, all of the Stoics were applauding.

Paul began at the point of his audience’s worldview.

Of course, he wants to lead them from their worldview to faith in Jesus. But he sensitively starts where they are at.

And he goes on to do more to connect with them. Paul quoted Greek philosophers to make his points.

The words, **[28a] “for in Him we live and move and exist”** are direct quotes from the Cretan poet Epimenides.<sup>20</sup>

And the next phrase, **[28b]...“as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’”** is from Aratus, a poet/philosopher from Cilicia (the area where Paul grew up).

The Apostle Paul was fluent in the secular culture of his day.

Evidently, he knew enough of the Greek poets to be able to insert just the right words into a message he was delivering to high-brow intellectuals on Mars Hill.

These quotes showed a respect for their culture and built a bridge from their world to his, making it easier for them to hear what he is about to say about Jesus.

Any of us might do the same thing if we’re trying to build credibility for what we’re saying.

- If you are trying to convince someone of an investment strategy, you might say, “...just like what Warren Buffett does.”
- Or if you are trying to impress upon a friend the importance of a healthy diet, you might try, “This is what Olympic athletes eat.”<sup>21</sup>

Paul is working hard to connect. But not so hard that he compromises the message.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen’s speech to the Jews in Acts 7 made virtually the same point. As highly as you may think of your building, it can’t house God.

<sup>19</sup> This would have been a blow to Athenian pride. They thought they were a uniquely privileged people, but Paul says that they were sourced in the same original Creation as everyone else.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul also quoted him in Titus 1:12.

<sup>21</sup> Billy Graham always used to do this. When holding a series of meetings in any city, he would reference local heroes and tell stories with a local flair to make the same connection Paul was making in Athens.

He goes on to say, [29] *“Being then the children of God,<sup>22</sup> we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.*

God - the God Paul is talking about; the one, true God - made people. It’s nutty to think that people could make a god (i.e. - an idol)! And he said this in Athens, a city chock full of idols!

Here is the punch line to Paul’s message.

Listen carefully and you’ll hear a marked difference between how he ends this message and how he has ended other messages in Acts.

Calling to conviction (vv. 30-31)

*[30] “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, [31] because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”<sup>23</sup>*

Now, did you notice what Paul does NOT say in this closing invitation?

He doesn’t say anything about the **cross**. He doesn’t mention the **Name of Jesus**. He doesn’t use the words “**trust**” or “**believe**” and he doesn’t urge his audience to “**have faith in**” or “**rely on**” Jesus.

So what is Paul doing in this message?

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<sup>22</sup> Athenians and Americans and all people everywhere are God’s offspring. Not in the sense that all are His redeemed children (and not that we all are little divinities!), but in the sense that all are created by God and receive life from Him.

<sup>23</sup> In this last section of the sermon, Paul touches on the three-fold themes of **sin** (the Athenians have committed sin), **righteousness** (the Athenians’ lack of it) and **judgment** (the Athenians will face it!) - the three areas of conviction upon which the Holy Spirit concentrates. (See John 14)

He is whetting his audience’s appetite. Hoping for another shot, he’s tilling the soil, planting seeds. He knows it isn’t time for a harvest yet. He isn’t trying to “close the sale.”

If I may be so bold, he’s urging them to a “next step”.

His audience doesn’t have enough content to decide for or against Jesus yet. He is not evangelizing. He is pre-evangelizing.

That is Gospel smart. The first time this group of intellectuals hears about Christianity is not the time to press for a decision.

Better to wait for another hearing, allow them time and space to think things through. No need to rush. Let the Holy Spirit convince them of their need.

And what was the response of Paul’s audience on Mars Hill?

*Response to Paul’s message (v. 32)*

- In Philippi, two households believed “just like that.”
- In Thessalonica *“some [Jews] and a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women”* believed.
- In Berea, *“many of [the Jews] believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.”*

On Mars Hill in Athens, there were those who, [32a]...*when they heard of the resurrection of the dead...began to sneer.*

But, others were more open. Even on Mars Hill, there were those who said, [32b]...*“We shall hear you again concerning this.”*

And some were so intrigued that they followed, learned more, and placed their trust in Jesus for salvation. [34] *But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>24</sup> and a woman named Damaris and others with them.<sup>25</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> By referring to him as an Areopagite, Luke is likely telling us that Dionysius was a highly regarded member of Athenian society.



## **Conclusion:**

Clearly, the apostle Paul was a master at exegeting the Scriptures. When speaking to Jews, he could point to dozens of passages from the Prophets to prove that the Messiah would suffer, die, and be raised again.

But, people also must be studied and observed. And Paul was a master at the fine art of *people* exegesis, too.

When he was in a synagogue, he spoke the Bible's language. But when he was on Mars Hill, he spoke differently.

People on Mars Hill needed Jesus just as desperately as people in the synagogue. But these two groups had far different backgrounds and worldviews.

When he was with the philosophers, he spoke their non-biblical language. He never compromised the message, but he did culture-ize the presentation to meet people where they were.

Today, we can learn from the wisdom of the Apostle Paul. If we want to be effective in bringing our friends to a great "NEXT" with Jesus, we need to study, observe, *exegete* them.

So, as we close this morning, I have an exegetical assignment for you.

Think about a friend, someone you know with whom you would love to share Jesus. Now, ask yourself -

- Does this friend share your belief in the authority of the Bible? Does he or she have a fundamentally biblical worldview?

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<sup>25</sup> Was Paul's ministry in Athens a failure? Some think so, but this is difficult to assess. There is no record of a church being founded in Athens. But I believe that if there was a failure to begin a church, that failure lay in the Athenian's hard hearts, not in Paul's methods and certainly not in his message.

- Does this friend belong to a faith other than Christianity? A Christian splinter group? A different religion altogether? Is he a "none"?<sup>26</sup>
- Does your friend know much of the Jesus story?

Be a student of your friend. Lovingly explore where he's at. Exegete him.<sup>27</sup>

After you observe and study and pray for your friend, ask yourself,

*"How can I best help my friend take a next step to Jesus? Is he/she ready to receive a clear Gospel presentation? Would an invitation to trust Jesus for salvation from sin make sense to him/her? Or, given my friend's lack of information, is his/her current need to have seed-planting, thoughtful, loving talks? Should I adopt a 'synagogue' or a 'Mars Hill' approach with this friend?"*

Answering these questions will help you ***[Colossians 4:6]...know how you should respond to each person.***

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<sup>26</sup> "None's" (those who claim no religious affiliation) - according to The Barna Group - are the fastest growing category in the United States.

<sup>27</sup> My exegesis of the people I speak with, the people I listen to, and the people I read, tells me that the culture in which we find ourselves is filled with people who have much more in common with the philosophers on Mars Hill than with the orthodox Jews in the synagogue. And if my people exegesis is accurate, what many people need are Christian friends who are eager to engage in spiritually sensitive conversations about life and God.