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CHAPTER ONE

The Quest for Common Ground

Gaining a Hearing with Your Audience

Most of us have experienced common ground with someone and felt how it brings down walls. For example, I'm a musician, and whenever I find out that someone I'm talking to plays an instrument or is a fan of a band I like, I feel an instant kinship with them. I understand them in a way that I didn't before, and I generally like them.

Common ground is found in mundane places: people who grew up in the same area we did, or who went to the same school; people who live in our neighborhoods, like the same food we do, or root for the same sports teams. We can know nothing else about a person, but if we have common ground in just one area, we are more open and friendly with them. Common ground counts for a lot.

Paul knew this. Part of his strategy for spreading the

message of Christianity around the Mediterranean was to seek common ground with anyone who would listen. Plenty of obstacles acted as barriers between people and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul and his team needed to find a receptive audience as often as possible. They wanted the message of Christ to fall on friendly ears. As Christian leaders we want the same thing today.

For that to happen, Paul and his team would need to cultivate common ground with their listeners. They accomplished that in many ways, but we're going to focus on two examples: their ministry in synagogues, and Paul's speech in the city of Athens.

COMMON GROUND IN THE SYNAGOGUES

Synagogues were local Jewish community centers that served a variety of purposes, religious and otherwise. Most synagogues had regular services that featured prayer and the reading of the Jewish Scriptures, and some served educational purposes. The temple in Jerusalem was the heart of religious life for all Jews, but thriving Jewish communities could be found in many cities throughout the Roman Empire. For those communities, the synagogue was a place to foster solidarity, friendship, and religious community.

When they came to a new city, Paul and his team typically started in the synagogue (Acts 17:1–2). This was a cornerstone of his team's evangelistic strategy. In fact, the first thing Paul did after becoming a Christian was to preach the gospel in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:20).

Why did Paul start there? Knowing a little bit about Paul's

background gives us the answer. Paul was born into a Jewish family in the city of Tarsus, a cosmopolitan and influential Greco-Roman city on the south coast of modern Turkey (Acts 21:39; 22:3; Phil. 3:5; 2 Cor. 11:22). Tarsus had an intellectual reputation; it was known for its schools and emphasis on learning. It was also an important travel and commercial hub in the region.¹ Like most large cities of the day, Tarsus had a substantial Jewish population. Paul's family and the rest of the Jewish population of Tarsus would have experienced fellowship and camaraderie in the synagogue.

Though Paul was raised in the mainly Greco-Roman environment of Tarsus, he was religiously educated in Jerusalem under the famed rabbi Gamaliel, which meant that he would have spent considerable time in Israel as a young man (Acts 22:3; 26:4).

So Paul had this dual background: he was raised in a city steeped in Greek and Roman culture, but he also had lived within the Jewish community of that city and was educated religiously in Jerusalem. As a result, Paul was able to engage knowledgeable on cultural matters with Greeks, Romans, and Jews. We also know that Paul was multilingual because of this unique background, speaking Greek, Aramaic, and possibly Latin and Hebrew as well (Acts 21:37–40; 26:14).

This diverse language and cultural pedigree enabled Paul to seek common ground with many types of people, especially those with Jewish cultural and religious heritage. When Paul spoke of Jesus as the long-promised Jewish Messiah, synagogue audiences would have been familiar with the Scriptures he used to make his argument—even if they were not ultimately persuaded. Paul could find instant common

ground in almost any synagogue, so he always started there if he could.

In many cases, the common ground between Paul and the Jews in these synagogues created enough rapport that they listened and became Christians. In some cases, however, they were hostile to his message (see Acts 13:50; 14:5; 17:5; 18:6; 19:9). The lesson here is that common ground will not *guarantee* a victory in ministry, but it will certainly set the stage for one. Paul clearly thought that the strategy would be effective in the long run, because he and his team continued to start in synagogues even after some negative experiences.

COMMON GROUND IN ATHENS

On Paul's second missionary journey through the Roman world (Acts 15:36–18:22, ca. AD 49–52), he spent time in Athens, Greece, where he had an incredible opportunity to dialogue with the city's intellectual elite. It's one of the most memorable moments in Paul's missionary career, and a perfect case study on seeking common ground.

Luke describes the scene for us in the book of Acts, telling us that Paul's spirit was "provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). This was not entirely unusual, because most of the Mediterranean world worshiped a collection of gods and goddesses. The Greeks and Romans worshiped gods with names that may be familiar to us: Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, Artemis, and others. The Egyptians also had their own set of gods and goddesses that were worshiped across the Mediterranean world: Isis, Horus, Osiris, etc. Polytheism like this was the religious norm of nearly every

culture in the ancient world. The Jews and Christians stood out in stark contrast against this religious backdrop because of their monotheistic beliefs.

As a native of Tarsus, Paul was familiar with the religious environment of the Greco-Roman world. Athens, however, was on a new level. As Paul walked the streets of the intellectual hub of the Empire, he found it unusually saturated with statues of pagan deities. The Acropolis, which towered above the city, was teeming with pagan temples and idols. The Parthenon, the imposing temple on the Acropolis, was the temple of Athena, the city's patron goddess. It loomed over the inhabitants below, silently proclaiming the power of a deity who was nothing more than carved stone. This bothered Paul. *A lot.*

The first thing he did was go into the synagogue (as usual), but he also went into the crowded Athenian marketplace and shared Christ with whoever happened to be there (Acts 17:17). Eventually Paul found himself debating with some Greek thinkers, and through that experience was invited to address an important group in Athens: the Areopagus (Acts 17:18–19).

The Areopagus was an ancient Athenian council that oversaw various religious and civic matters. *Areopagus* is a Greek word that translates “Hill of Ares,” or more popularly, “Mars Hill.” The council got its name from the small hill that sits nearby the larger Acropolis. This was their traditional meeting place.

The council got wind of Paul's message and how he engaged with the Greek philosophers, and they wanted to hear what he had to say. Luke describes what happened next:

They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. (Acts 17:19–21)

I have to smile every time I read Luke’s comment in verse 21. It appears that he found the intellectual climate of Athens to be a little pretentious.

So Paul finds himself standing before this renowned council in Athens. Can you imagine the pressure? Because of how influential the members of the Areopagus were, Paul was in a position to make an exponential impact if he spoke of Christ in a compelling way. What he chose to say is a master class in finding and leveraging common ground.

Paul begins this way:

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” (Acts 17:22–23)

Paul starts by commenting on the religious environment in Athens. He doesn’t do it in a condemning way, but just as an observant outsider. He tells them that he notices they are

very religious, and that as he looked around he saw something unusual—an altar to an unknown god.

The other altars in Athens would have had the names of the gods and goddesses on them, or a representation of the god that was unmistakable. But just to be sure that they weren't forgetting one of the gods and inadvertently offending him or her, the Athenians apparently created this generic altar to an unknown god.² Paul's strategy was essentially to say, "That unknown god you worship? I know who he is." After this brief introduction, Paul gets to the heart of the matter:

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man." (Acts 17:24–29)

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His first words are pretty remarkable if you know something about the physical terrain of Athens. If Paul were standing on the Areopagus addressing the council, it would be quite a claim to say that God doesn't live in temples. The Parthenon and the other temples on the Acropolis were in view as Paul spoke. He may have even gestured toward the temples as he made his point.

A few years ago I had the chance to visit Athens. Here is a photo of me standing on the Areopagus. The Acropolis with its many temples is in the background.



RYAN ON THE AREOPAGUS.
PHOTO BY ASHLEY LOKKESMOE

Paul was saying to the Athenians that, yes, there is a god. It's right to want to know and serve God, but it's wrong to think that He's something we create or that He lives in houses we build for Him. He is not demonizing the Athenians; he is suggesting that they *misunderstand* who God is. Paul describes God as a creator and sustainer, emphasizing His sovereignty over history. These were not entirely foreign concepts to the

Athenians—so once again, Paul is trying to find whatever common ground he can work with.

Next, Paul does something extraordinary. In verse 28, he quotes two Greek poets to describe God: “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”³ Paul goes on to argue that since we are God’s offspring, He should look something like us since children resemble their parents. How can we be God’s children if we are the ones building His statues out of gold or stone? Paul finishes his famous speech to the Areopagus by indirectly introducing Christ:

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30–31)

Paul introduces the idea of repentance, a key part of Jesus’ message, and then refers to Jesus simply as *a man whom [God] has appointed*. He concludes with one brief comment about the resurrection.

What’s most notable about Paul’s speech is what he *did not* say. Paul did not quote Scripture. He did not mention Israel. He did not mention Jerusalem or the temple. He did not mention the name of Jesus. He did none of that. That sort of thing would be a perfect strategy for a Jewish audience, who would be familiar with the Old Testament and the idea of a Messiah.

But this was not the synagogue. This was an illustrious

council of Athenian thinkers. They were probably unfamiliar with the Jewish Scriptures. Paul knew this, so he sought common ground somewhere else. He commented on their city's religious climate. He leveraged their altar to an unknown god as a launching point. He spoke about God in somewhat generic terms that would not be too confusing or off-putting. He quoted their own poets to back up his claim that God is not something we create.

Paul wanted to find whatever foothold he could to open up a dialogue with the Athenians. He wanted them to feel like he understood them and could speak their language. I'm betting Paul did not view this speech as all he wanted to say, but his best opening statement in what he hoped would become an ongoing discussion. He could more fully explain the gospel through the lenses of Scripture and Jesus' ministry on another occasion; the goal of this initial encounter was to create some intrigue and gain a receptive audience.

Luke tells us that the reaction in Athens was mixed. Some sneered, others wanted to hear him again, and some believed—including a woman named Damaris and a man named Dionysius who happened to be a member of the Areopagus (Acts 17:32–34).

Why was seeking common ground so important to Paul and his team? Paul actually tells us in his own words in 1 Corinthians 9:19–22:

... I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under

the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

The phrase *I have made myself a servant to all* could also be translated *I have enslaved myself to all*.⁴ Paul put himself in the lowest position possible; he put everyone else first. He spoke to the Jews on Jewish terms and to the Gentiles (non-Jews) on Gentile terms. He became weak to the weak, and so on. Paul tried to be all things to all people.

Why did he do that? He tells us in verse 22: To save people by all means! To win as many as possible to Christ. In fact, he uses the word *win* five times in that passage, each time referring to someone placing their trust in Christ for their salvation.

Paul's hunt for common ground also seems to have been born out of what he expresses in Colossians 4:5–6. “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

Seeking common ground is wise because it's disarming. Common ground helps to start conversations off on the right foot. He also said in this text to make *the best use of the time*—i.e., to make the most of every opportunity. Searching for common ground in these different environments was a wise investment of time and enabled Paul and his team to make the most of the opportunities. As we saw in his speech

to the Areopagus, Paul seasoned his conversations with salt, peppering in cultural references and appealing to whatever shared heritage he could find.

Another possible motive for Paul's pursuit of common ground is that he had personally experienced what it was like to have someone seek common ground with him. Barnabas had built a relationship with Paul after he became a Christian, and it wasn't necessarily an easy thing for Barnabas to do. Prior to his encounter with Christ, Paul was a notorious persecutor of Christians. He ruthlessly hunted down Christians, imprisoned them, and sought their death (Acts 8:3; 9:2, 21; 22:4–5; 26:10–11; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13).

But the risen Christ showed up and turned Paul around. As soon as Paul became a Christian, he began to preach in the Jewish synagogues (Acts 9:20; 26:20). Eventually he went to Jerusalem to meet the leadership of the church, the disciple Peter and Jesus' brother James (Acts 9:26–28; Gal. 1:18–19).

Paul had a big problem, though. Lots of Christians didn't trust him. They didn't believe he had actually become a Christian, and they were still afraid of him (Acts 9:21, 26; Gal. 1:22–23). Thankfully, Barnabas knew Paul. They had Christ as their common ground, and that was enough for Barnabas to befriend this former persecutor. Barnabas vouched for Paul and told the other Christian leaders that Paul had been preaching fearlessly in the name of Christ (Acts 9:27).

Barnabas helped the other early Christian leaders see that they had spiritual common ground with Paul. In doing so, Barnabas forged a deep friendship and ministry partnership with Paul that would impact many lives for years to come.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US TODAY

What can we learn from this strategy of seeking common ground that was so characteristic of Paul's team? The biggest lesson is that we need to change our mentality toward nonbelievers or outsiders. In our culture we often fall into the trap of an "us versus them" mentality when it comes to spiritual matters. This is most evident in the social media environment, which promotes insensitive declarations and hypersensitive responses. We see people as either allies or enemies and quickly put them into one of those two columns based on superficial observations. If someone winds up in the enemy column, they are usually written off as a person who needs to be proven wrong, an opponent.

Paul and his team would have been baffled by this. Paul looked at people who believed very different things from him and asked himself, *How can I build bridges to these people?* Paul wanted as many people as possible to be saved. He tailored his message to the audience; he didn't insist that they acclimate to his preferred presentation. He knew that common ground was the smartest way to put the gospel in the best light.

When is the last time you read an offensive remark on social media and tried to befriend the person who made it? Most of us would never do that, but that's the kind of thing that would be the modern equivalent of Paul's strategy, the twenty-first-century version of becoming all things to all people to win as many as possible.

But this doesn't just happen individually; it happens on a community level, too. We tend to group up with other people who look like us, talk like us, think like us, and live where we

live. We often don't realize that we live pretty close to other communities where people think very differently but need Jesus just as much as we do.

Paul and his team went to synagogues first because of the shared religious and cultural heritage. What groups are like that in your community? Maybe people in your community grew up in church and understand the basics, but they've walked away from the faith because it never seemed real to them. They would share some semblance of a religious heritage with you. It just needs to be revived. Find people like that!

Maybe people who live near you are very involved in the community through the schools or kids' sports leagues, but they don't attend church and don't know Jesus. You would have community-based common ground with them. Help them to understand what God's vision is for the community and the next generation.

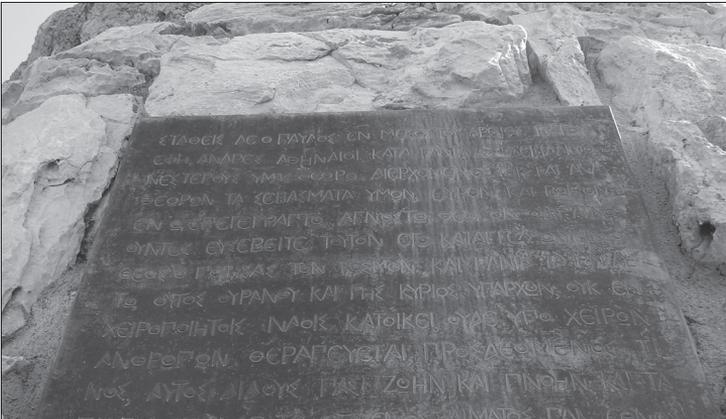
Maybe other nonprofits in the area are committed to certain efforts that overlap with the mission of the church: food banks, homeless shelters, mentoring programs, prison ministries, etc. The people who volunteer in these organizations may not know Jesus, but they care deeply about people. Help them understand how much Jesus cares about them and the whole world!

Along with changing our attitude toward outsiders, we also need to adjust our speech toward them. When Paul went to Athens, he engaged the intellectual elites on their terms. He spoke confidently and intelligently and did not assume that they thought the way he did. He tried to win them over with his eloquence. We need to do the same thing. We need to season our speech with salt. We need to speak about Christ

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in a way that is biblical, intelligent, sensitive, compelling, and attractive. We need to stop viewing spiritual conversations as *arguments* that need to be won. We need to instead view our spiritual speech as a mechanism to get to know *people* who need to be won.

Seeking common ground is a powerful tool in the hands of a Christian willing to wield it. It overcomes countless barriers to the gospel. When someone experiences common ground with you, they are more willing to hear what you have to say. They are more willing to consider your perspective. Simply put, they are more likely to *like* you. Common ground gives you a level of influence that you would not otherwise have, because most people are unwilling to be led by someone they don't know or don't like. We should view ourselves as the seekers and wielders of common ground with any people or communities that our ministries touch.



BRONZE PLAQUE OF PAUL'S AREOPAGUS SPEECH (ACTS 17:22–31).

PHOTO BY RYAN LOKKESMOE.

PAUL AND HIS TEAM

I believe that the pursuit of common ground is one of the most neglected leadership strategies in the church today, despite its being one of the most obvious tactics of Paul and his team. And it was also one of their most effective practices, as history has proven. Today, if you visit Athens, you'll find a bronze plaque with the text of Paul's speech on the side of the Areopagus. In spite of the hill's ancient association with the prestigious Athenian council, history would primarily remember it as the place where Paul offered his persuasive words to the Athenians.

Also, the street that runs alongside the Acropolis in Athens is named after Dionysius, one of the members of the council who became a Christian after Paul's speech (Acts 17:34).



STREET SIGN IN ATHENS. "ROAD OF DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE."

PHOTO BY RYAN LOKKESMOE

Seeking common ground works.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What stood out to you about this chapter?
- What places or institutions in your community might be like the synagogue was to Paul? How might you find common ground with people there in order to share Christ?
- What cultural barriers exist in your community that you could work to overcome?
- How could you talk about Christ with nonbelievers in a way that is similar to how Paul spoke to the Athenians?
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. How does this text relate to the practice of seeking common ground?
- What did you find most challenging about this chapter?
- What is one thing you can change this week based on what you learned in this chapter?
- Suggested Prayer: Lord, I want to look for common ground with those who are far from You. I admit that I am inclined to see differences between myself and others, rather than similarities. I acknowledge that seeking common ground might make me uncomfortable. I need Your guidance and strength to do this. Allow me to see people the way You see them. Show me how to honor You in the way that I befriend and communicate with others. Help me to grasp all that You have done for me so that I am propelled to share the gospel—even with people who seem distant from You or different from me. Amen.