Reading Your City - J.R. Briggs

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What I want us to talk about, it's kind of a $10 word or $10 phrase here, incarnational ecclesiology. But I want to unpack that a little bit more in this session. And the easy way to do that is just to simply say, learning to read your city through the lens of the gospel. So it isn't just to huddle and cuddle and create a nice little pocket of Jesus people, but it's saying how in the world are we launching the people that God has entrusted to us out into the world. So if we see ourselves like lungs where we're inhaling,

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coming together on Sunday mornings when we gather, and then exhaling out into the world throughout the week, and then we inhale again, and then we exhale. And so we kind of, we see ourselves as a breathing organism of the gospel. And so there's a lot you're going to learn in this about what do we do when we inhale of gathering together as God's people, worship and preaching and teaching all good things. But we also have to be able to, to exhale out to the. rest of the week rather than just hold our breath. And I think you get the metaphor on that.

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So, but let's just very simply, let's talk about what is incarnation. We hear the word incarnation or incarnational a lot. So, next slide. So, when we talk about incarnation, what are we talking about? And I try to do a little bit of kind of whiteboard session here in this. Next slide. When I think of incarnation, I actually think of chile con carne. I think of ninth grade Spanish class, right? What does that mean? Chile with meat on. And so, if we could say, what is the incarnation? We could say it's Dios con carne. It's God with meat on, God with skin on, Jesus.

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coming down in the form of a person in human flesh, right? John 1.14 in the message, and the word became flesh and blood, Dios con carne, and moved into the neighborhood, moved into the neighborhood. And so, if that's the model of Jesus in terms of incarnational living, then what does it mean for us to be a part of incarnational ecclesiology? How do we be the kind of church that are the people of God cleverly disguised as Dios Concarne? And so if we think about incarnation, next slide, we have to be thinking through what are the barriers that we are crossing?

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Because any time that there's incarnation, there's always barrier-crossing realities. So, for example, it could be the other side of the tracks. It could be across the street. It could be social barriers or ethnic barriers or economic barriers. Jesus, of course, comes, he breaks through the barrier of heaven down

and now into earth, onto earth as that barrier that he crossed. And so as you think about how can you be the incarnational presence of Jesus in your particular zip code or region or city or county,

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I want you to be thinking through what barriers are we crossing just as Jesus crossed barriers. So incarnational ecclesiology means forming your church. By reading your city through the lens of the gospel and then responding that way. Next slide. Bishop Graham Cray, Bob and I, in addition to being on staff with the Ecclesia Network, we also are on staff with an organization called Fresh Expressions. And Bishop Graham Cray is kind of the godfather of the Fresh Expressions global movement.

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And he described incarnation three ways. Meeting people on their terms. Number two, taking it as seriously as they do. And three, helping them find Christ, and this is really important, who is already there. That's a really important thing. Meeting people on their terms, not my terms, not what I want for them. Meeting them where they are, taking it as seriously as they do. So when taxes go up and people feel it, so do I. When there's great joy, when our team wins the Super Bowl, so do I. We take it as seriously as they do about the small and significant things of life.

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And then helping them. We find Christ who's already there. Our language betrays us when we don't think incarnationally. We say things like this. We're going on a mission trip to Malawi, and we're going to take Jesus there. No, we're not. He's already there. He created it. What we are doing is helping people identify, or we might help them recognize or connect dots to this God that loves them, who's already in their midst. And so that's what we're going to talk about today.

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How do we connect dots in this? But let's not let our language betray us that we're not going to bring Christ anywhere. We may represent Christ. We may accurately bear witness to Christ, but we will not bring Christ there. He's already created the world. And so these are really important as we think about incarnational ecclesiology. What are we after? When you create a church, when you plant a church, a Jesus community in a particular zip code, and you meet people on their terms, you take life as seriously as they do. And you help.

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connect the dots to help them see Christ who's already there, you're going to have a church that's on mission. Next slide. When I think about incarnation, next slide, I actually think about the third floor of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism on the campus of Wheaton, Wheaton College in Chicago. There's a sculpture at the end of the hall right by the water fountain. My friend Tracy used to be on staff, and his office was in the Billy Graham Center. I remember visiting him, and he said, I want to show you a sculpture. So he took me down to this

sculpture, and it's titled Corpus. It was created in 2013 by the artist David J.P. Hooker. And here's the.

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contents of it. It's a crucifix. Next slide. But if you go up closer to it, one of the things you notice, and even the next slide here, Bob, if you notice there, it looks like hair. And the reason being is, it is. The contents, the media that was used were, they were vacuum bags collected from the college's custodial staff. Next slide, please. It was full of dirt and hair and fibers and human fingernail clippings and skin cells and lint.

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And under this, it reads, for our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And I just stood there in 2 Corinthians 5. I just stood there and I said, oh, my gosh, this is incarnation of Jesus literally taking on our skin and our flesh and our hair and spreading his arms wide for the sake of us so that we can be rescued back into who he is.

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And so this idea of incarnation to me is wrapped up so much in this sculpture that sits on the third floor of the Billy Graham Center. That's what this is about. You know, one of the things. That Andrew Walls talks about, he says that incarnation is always culture specific. And so we have to see ourselves as a missionary, not the Malawi. but a missionary to your zip code. And sometimes when we do this, oftentimes when we do this, we have to pay a cultural cost for the sake of the gospel. Sometimes it's a financial cost.

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Sometimes it's a relational cost. But there's always a cultural cost for the sake of the gospel when you're a missionary to your setting. And it's going to be different for everybody what that is and to what level that cost might be. But we have to be trained to be bilingual, where we exegete the scriptures, but we also exegete the culture. Because we're always playing in the way game. We haven't had many home games in the cultural shift here in America, religiously, for a long time. And so we've got to learn to understand the rhythms, the values,

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the patterns, the symbols, the priorities, the characteristics of a particular way, of a particular group of people who lives in the area where we want the gospel to flourish. So when you think about, you have to understand. So when we talk about culture, culture is what people do. And there are six components of culture. Next slide. Oh, actually, yeah. All right. So there are six components of culture. And I want to just briefly go through these because this is really important to understand.

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Culture is about places. It's about rituals. It's about practices that we're a part of. It's about values. It's about dreams. And it's about language. And I'll say those again, these six components. It's about places, rituals, practices, values, dreams,

and language. You want to know a particular context. You ask yourself, where are the places that are of most meaning or most traveled in the world? In this particular context. Rituals. What is it that people are engaged in that they do with a sort of reverence or significance that means a great deal to them? It has symbols involved. What are the practices that.

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That people engage in on a regular basis. What do they value? What are their dreams? And conversely, what are their nightmares? Where are their fears coming out in terms of where their dreams might be taken away? And then lastly, language. Words create worlds. Language creates culture. And so what is the language that's being used? For example, we have one word for snow in the English language. You've probably heard this before, but the Inuit Americans, the Eskimos, I guess as some would call it,

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they have like 19 words for the word snow. Why? Because like in their culture, like that's a big deal because they're around it all the time. So language creates culture in that. So as we think about this idea of the postures that we need to have to engage and embrace and embody incarnational ecclesiology, there are four statues, four of my favorite statues in the world. And I live here on the north side of Philadelphia. And this is the – if you've ever seen the Rocky movies, the big building,

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the big brown building on the upper left there, that's the Philadelphia Art Museum. On the back side of that, the other side of that, are the Rocky Steps. If you ever run up the Rocky Steps, hey, yo, Adrian, like that's that building on the other side. And then you see the Philly skyline way off in the distance. This is the Schuylkill River. And to the left is Kelly Drive. And it's very busy with cars, but there's a running, walking, biking path that's very popular, maybe the most popular outdoor spot in the city. If you go up Kelly Drive just about half a mile behind me – this is looking south.

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If you go north about half a mile, you'll see a plaza that has four statues in it. It's a fairly nondescript plaza. I went by it for years and missed it. Next slide. And I didn't even know it was there. But in this plaza were these four statues. And as I began to look at these four statues created by four different – artists. I began to go, wow, this is what incarnational missional ecclesiology looks like. This is the posture of what it means to be the people of God in our culture today.

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These four artists were trying to represent the culture of Philadelphia, but I said, man, this translates well to what we're trying to do as kingdom leaders. Next slide. So the first one that we see is laborer, and if you can see there at the bottom, it says he wrought miracles. Up close, the hands are big, the feet are big.

It looks like an iron welder putting on his protective apron and gloves and maybe an iron welder's helmet up on his head there. Philadelphia is.

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very blue collar, but as I think about this, I think the church, you know, we're called to work hard. We are co-laborers with Christ, right? We cannot be lazy when it comes to, starting new kingdom movements, and so we work hard. And by the way, gospel is not against work, as Dallas Willard reminded us. The gospel is against earning. We should be working hard, but our motivation is that we do it not to earn right standing with God or others, but we do it out of loving service. So we work really hard. The second statue is that of.

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a poet. And it says, he shaped our dreams. But oftentimes when I go down there, people take a sharpie marker and they put a big S right in front of the he. And I think that's probably more accurate. She shaped our dreams. If you look on the back of her, if you went around the back, she has very long hair. So I call her her. And a little more feminine posture, more feminine expression here of this idea of she shaped our dreams, this kind of tenderness, a scroll over her heart, this poet. And the arts are a very big deal in Philadelphia, besides New York,

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there's more public art display than any city in America. And so the arts are important. If I were to ask you, what is a kiss? You might answer two mandibles pressed up against each other in the form of affection. Now, that's true. But if you've ever been kissed, that's not a kiss. It's fireworks. It's a dance. It's flowers blooming in a field on a spring morning. Right? We can't describe it in a textbook answer, two mandibles pressed up against each other.

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in the form of affection. That's so right, it's almost wrong. And so we need to be people that are articulating the good news of Jesus in poetic ways. No wonder much of our Old Testament is poetry. Because some things of truth have to be articulated in a way that doesn't come across sounding like a textbook. Sometimes I worry about the church that we are too much about truth. That we actually don't ever get to communicating that truth. truth in any other way other than an academic textbook. And so we need to be able to articulate.

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that, the truth in ways that are creative and draw in people's hearts, not just their heads. Next slide. But we do need to talk about truth. And so scientists, he weighed the stars. If you go up close, proportionally, the head is really huge on this statue. And he's leaning on, I think, a sextant or some sort of nautical tool or instrument there. And so it's brains and, the importance of thought. Besides Boston, there are more colleges and universities in Philadelphia.

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than any city in America. And so this idea of thoughtfulness, loving God with all of our minds, is really an important posture for us, that we are about the truth. We

are about the truth, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the virgin birth, saved by grace, not by works. These are truths that we stake our whole faith on that are important to communicate. And so then the last, is that my favorite statue in the whole world preacher he guided our ways now the angle isn't.

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great here it's kind of hard to to do with perspective perfectly when you go take a picture of this but when you when you're down there he's this this preacher is leaning over and his head is a little bit bigger than normal but his ears are disproportionately larger and you can see how the hair is kind of parted so that full ear can be engaged that in some senses I always envisioned the artist here going like this and then and then carved it just like that when it stopped, now normally when we think about preacher he guided our ways we think of someone maybe with.

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their mouth open you know like really presenting but instead it's this posture of listening, preaching robes on but a posture of listening now Philadelphia was founded by William Penn who was a Quaker the Quakers are very different today than they were theologically back then but they listening to the spear was, a very important part of what they did. And so this idea of a listening posture helps us realize if we're going to be incarnational, we have to be about listening to the spirit, listening to our.

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culture, listening to what God is up to in the world. And so I just want to encourage us with our posture of incarnational ecclesiology, that we're laborers, that we work hard, that we're poets, that we communicate the truth with creative ways that reach people's hearts. Scientists, that we speak to truth at all times, but preacher, that we're people that are saying, come on spirit, tell me more. I want to hear more. Scripture, speak to me. Culture, what do I need to know to connect some dots of what you're doing in the world? So we have to be aware of our posture,

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confidence in the gospel, but humility that we're here to serve, to earn the right to be heard. And so the question we always like to ask is, how can we serve? If you don't know where to begin, and we'll get into at the end, very ridiculous. tirelessly practical ways that you can learn to read your city even better. But if you don't know what to do, look for experts or long timers or natives in your zip code, your neighborhood, your context, your city, and just ask, how can we serve?

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No strings attached. How can we serve? And the only way we do that is if we're listening, is if we're listening. So I want to look at, we're going to look at Acts 17 in just a second. And so if you have your Bible, great, you can pull it up on BibleGateway.com if you don't have a physical Bible in front of you. But before we get to Acts 17, I want us to think about the three missionary speeches that

Paul gave in the book of Acts. In Acts 13, most of Acts 13, he actually gives a sermon for the synagogue.

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And he's preaching specifically to Jews, right? And the synagogue speech, it was at Pisidian Antioch, is specific. Specifically for Jews, it's the first of Paul's evangelistic. sermons that were recorded, and the only one that he gave to a predominantly Jewish audience. Now, throughout the book, Luke takes pains to demonstrate how the gospel was proclaimed in various key contexts and to different kinds of people. But the content of Paul's address.

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reveals a masterfully contextualized presentation of the gospel, and he targeted his audience quite well. He found common ground and a shared story. And the speech begins with the rehearsal of God's mighty ancient history throughout Israel, and he includes God's action in Christ. But he's speaking specifically to the Jews, so he's using words that they understand. But if you go to Acts chapter 14,

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he's preaching to rural pagans in Lystra. So in Luke's account of Paul's preaching in Lystra, and also in Acts chapter 14, he's preaching to the Jews. And he's preaching to the Jews. And he's the gospel enters a brave new culture. and religious world. Here we encounter the only speeches that are actually directed to pagan Gentiles. And the setting for the speech isn't a synagogue, as was his normal custom. Instead he addresses the crowd on the street, kind of like an itinerant preacher, itinerant.

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evangelist or itinerant philosopher. And so what does he do to connect with these rural pagans? His initial point of contact is trying to connect on a shared humanity, that we're all part of one race. It's kind of how he goes through it. But Paul tailors the emphasis and the expression of his preaching to fit a crowd of rustic Gentile polytheists. They believe in a whole bunch of gods, out in the middle of nowhere, and the starting.

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point of their immediate confusion, he directs them to the true source of that miraculous power which is found in Jesus. So again, at the end of the day... Acts 13 to the Jews in the synagogue, Acts 14 to rural pagans outside of the synagogue, out in the world, and then we get to Acts 17. This is one of my favorite passages. And a year and a half ago, I had a chance to go to Athens, which Mars Hill is in Athens, where he's with educated pagans. And I got to actually go up and stand on Mars Hill in Athens.

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It was incredibly moving. Now, there's something you need to know. Let me give you some background information here on the local legend of what had been in the minds of people in and around Mars Hill, Athenians, when Paul shows up.

Now, sometime in the 6th century B.C., and that's ancient history, there was a man named Nicias, and he stood before the Athenian council on Mars Hill. And he reported back from a trip that he had just taken to the Pythian Oracle. And it was a desperate trip because Athens had been plagued with disease.

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And he had been plagued with disease for some time. And Nicias came back and he said this. He said, our city is under a curse. And the priest revealed that there's a certain God who's punishing us for our heinous crimes of our former king. And so one of the council members spoke up and said, well, what God could this be? We've offered atoning sacrifices to every God we can think of. I can't imagine what other God this could be. And Nicias replied, I don't know either. And the priest at the oracle didn't either. But he said, we must send a ship to Crete to fetch a man named Epimenides.

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And the oracle assures me, he said, that he'll know how to appease this God. And so after a lot of debate, they seek this foreigner out. And Epimenides stepped off the ship of the harbor town of Piraeus. It's a little harbor town today, not much ruins or remnants left. And he and his traveling party began to walk up the road to Assyria. And as they journeyed up that road, there were some people who were not sure if they were going to be able to get to Assyria. And rather than being surprised or shocked by the epidemic that had broken out, Epimenides instead was shocked by something else.

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He said, never before have I seen so many gods in one place. In fact, he said, it's probably easier for me to find a god here than for me to find a man. And at that, Nicias laughed and replied, yeah, but for the life of me, I can't figure out who this god could be. I mean, we worship every possible god we can imagine. And Epimenides wondered if that was their problem. The next morning, Epimenides, he stood up before the council on Mars Hill along with a flock of choice-hungry sheep.

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And he had requested these sheep the night before. And the foreigner stood there in front of the council, and hundreds of Athenians gathered there desperately longing for a sign of hope. And Epimenides addressed the council, and he said, I'm going to offer a sacrifice based on three assumptions. First. there's a God out there and we don't know his name. But he's somehow connected to this plague. And the second assumption is that if we can invoke the help of this God, he is great enough and good enough that he will come to our aid. And then someone said, well, how can we invoke the name.

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of a God we don't even know his name? And Epimenides said, and that's my third assumption, that this God is so great and so good that if we call on his name, he will smile on our ignorance as long as we acknowledge that ignorance

before him. And so they all looked to the sky and Epimenides cried out, unknown God, look down on this city, forgive us, deliver this city. And now if you would choose the sheep that you desire, and if you would cause them to lie down upon the grass, we will sacrifice those sheep to you. And with that, they released the hungry sheep.

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to wander around the grassy hill. And miraculously, several of the sheep began to lie down rather than graze like the rest of the flock. And so immediately there were artisans that began to, They began to mark the spot and collect the sheep for the sacrifice, and Epimenides instructed them to build an altar on that spot inscribed with this phrase, Agnos Theo, which means to the unknown God. And they did as he instructed and sacrificed the sheep, and that very day the plague began to lift, and within a week the people of Athens were well again.

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Now, half a century later, there was another foreigner, this time a Jew, who got off the ship in the harbor town of Piraeus and walked the same long road up to Athens that Epimenides had done 500 years before. Now, Paul demonstrates an awareness of Athenian culture where he gains credibility and he earns the right to be heard because he knew the story that was going on in the. Minds of people for the last 500 years and what had happened with.

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So, all that to say, if you have your Bible, it's really important because it's hard to understand Acts 17 if you don't understand that back story that Paul knew. So, I'm going to actually start reading in verse 16 here, and I'm going to read it and just kind of pause a little bit. No, I'll read it all the way through. Bob, go ahead and put up the next slide. Here's what I'd like for us to do. I know we've got—all right, so, I don't know if we want to, like, number—how about we do this?

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All right, I'm just trying to expand this, though. All right, here's what I'd like. Megan and Davey, I want you to be in group one where I just want you to notice Paul's actions, okay? So, when you notice what Paul does, you can put it in the chat box, okay? In group two, Margaret and Chris. I would like for you to notice Paul's actions. Posture. What do you notice? Not his actions or his words, but his posture. How is he posturing himself with the people? Okay. And when you are hearing some things, you can kind of put that in the chat box, a part of group two. All right. Group three. How about Brian and Anna and Mike? I want you to notice what Paul said. All right. Pay special attention to his words. All right. And then Tim and Jim and Selvin. Good to see you here, Selvin. The three of you, I would like for you to notice what Paul does not do.

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What does he not do? What do you expect him to do? But he actually, you go, why didn't he do that? Why did he refrain? Okay. Again, group one, notice Paul's actions. Group two, notice his posture. Group three, notice his words. Group four,

notice what Paul does not do. Okay. So let me read this starting in verse 16. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews.

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and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happen to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, what is this babbler 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. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, that's on Mars Hill, by the way, may we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting?

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You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean. All the Athenians and the foreigners who live there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Then Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus, and he 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 saw that you were very religious. I saw that you were very religious. I saw that you were very religious. I saw that you were very religious. I saw that you were very religious. I even found an altar with this inscription, Agnos Theos, to an unknown God.

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Now what you worship as something unknown, I'm 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, as he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men 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.

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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 poets have said, we are his offspring. Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver. 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.

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For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He will give proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some even sneered, but others said, We want to hear you again on this subject. At that, Paul left the council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was

Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

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Kind of interesting here. As you think about what you want to share, go ahead and put that in the chat box. Just indicate what group you're in, too, by the way. Just say group one and then some of your reflections. As you're doing that, Bob, could you show a couple of the slides there? I just want to make sure that we have a... clear understanding of what's going on. I have some slides there on the actual Mars Hill location. Can you put that up there? Yeah, so this is up, you've seen the Acropolis there, the famous scene,

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the Parthenon up on the hill. I'm on the part, this is up on the Parthenon looking down, and that rock outcropping here, this right here is Mars Hill, the Areopagus. There's little stairs that come up here, and it's just an outcropping where you can sit and do that. Next slide. So this has been looking from Mars Hill back up to the Parthenon, the very famous Parthenon up on the hill where Zeus was said to have lived. Next slide. And then again, this is,

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yeah, this is the, the Parthenon, the Acropolis there. And I think there's one more slide. Or maybe two more. Yeah, so this is, you see the little stairs there. You just walk up the stairs and there's people up there. That's where Paul would have been standing, talking through these issues with the people. And then I think there's one more. Yeah, so someone said, hey, you taught on this. Yeah, so you taught on this. You might as well get a picture of you teaching. I got to teach the tour group this passage of Acts 17. And then next slide. You can even see some footmarks, some impressions there looking back at the Acropolis from Mars Hill.

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So some of you are putting the chat box here, which is great. You can, not yet, Bob. Yeah, there we go. Nope. Go back one more. So, yeah. So group one, Davey said Paul was waiting. Yes. That's an important thing. Paul wasn't intending. He wasn't intending to go. He was waiting. He was just biding his time, waiting for his buddies to show up, just hanging out. Athens wasn't on his strategic stop.

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He wasn't necessarily planning to be on Mars Hill. And he was distressed. And, Davey, I'm so glad you picked up on that in terms of distressed. The word there in the original language is so frustrated you make a guttural sound. So it's like, ah, that's the literal interpretation of that word of greatly distressed, ah, just the kind of gnashing of teeth, groaning, moaning. He spoke. He stood. He looked. He searched. He reasoned. Proclaimed. He articulated.

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He limited his scope. Great. Man, fantastic. I'm so glad you pulled out a lot of those verbs there, Davey. So good. Yeah. Yep. Yeah, he walked around. He

observed. He noticed, right? Notice how he uses his eyes, his ears, his mouth, and his feet. Those four body parts of Paul really come out here because he's understanding the incarnation. theology. Yeah, Brian Long, group two, what did he say? Yeah, he says he's very religious,

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right? He's affirming them, affirming what he could affirm. That's a great posture. Let's start with the commonality, right? He didn't come out and just, you bunch of sinners, how are you idiots? How can you not know about this God who loves you? He says, I see that you're religious in every way. Like, what a great starting point. That's good rhetoric, right? If you're in rhetorician, the first thing you want to do is, you know, kind of win your audience over by making a connection to them. Yeah, fantastic. I see that in every way you're very religious. Yeah, Mike, in group three, Paul quotes several well-known.

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philosophers in his speech, and he links what they said to the resurrection. Absolutely. Bob, go ahead and put those next two quotes on. If you have your Bible, you may notice a little footnote at the bottom there. And if you look in your footnote or a study Bible, when it says, for in him we live and move and have our being. sounds great. Anybody recognize this guy? Epimenides. That's the dude from 500 years ago. That's the oracle. This is like quoting Katy Perry, Taylor Swift. This is quoting.

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Kanye. He's saying that as your poets have said, and then the next slide, he quotes Aretas. We are his offspring, a very famous line that would have been spoken among Athens by their poets. I find that so interesting. Mike, I'm so glad you picked up on that, that he doesn't just say, well, this is what the Bible says. He's actually drawing some connections and parallels to their dreams, to their rituals, to their leaders, those who are shaping their.

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imaginations. Yeah. Yeah. Brian Long also picked up on that, quoting their own philosophers. Yeah, Paul stands in the middle of the group of people. You bet. Yeah, so important. Yeah, Anna, he recognized their culture and takes parts of their culture. Yes, great. I'm so glad that you picked up on that. Yeah, Megan mentioned that Paul waited. He conversed. He listened. He looked. He perceived. Yeah, it's a great word, Megan, perceived. It's easy to look, but can we perceive and see what's going on below the surface?

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He proclaimed, he preached Jesus, and we often forget this. You're right. He left. He didn't move in and stay there forever. He left. Yeah. Yeah, Tim, you mentioned he did not demean them while still telling them to question things. You bet. Man, that's so important that there's a posture of affirming and of respect. He talks about the realities of God. Yeah. Sullivan said he does not react even though he

was distressed. He responds. That's exactly right. Right. We could easily, ah, and then just unload on people.

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But he chanted. that into saying, I see that you all are very religious, but he isn't a softie. What does he say? God was patient with people in the past. He could overlook their ignorance, but not now. Everyone must repent, right? So he goes from soft to hard. He does both. And he uses logic, Chris says, yes, to build the case rather than history or an emotion. That's exactly right, Chris. In Acts 13, Paul goes back and tells the story of God's faithfulness in Israel. He doesn't.

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do that here. He works through their Greek logic and understanding of how they approach this. Great observations, everybody. That's fantastic. So now that we have the foundation of the house, we've looked at what is culture, what is incarnation. We looked at posture. We looked at Paul, who's a model example here. By the way, it doesn't, say that a whole, it doesn't say thousands of people. Revival did not break out. Some would say that this was, not very successful in Acts 17. But I love this little kind of subdued, little offhanded remark.

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here at the end. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus. By the way, pretty significant role, if I may say so myself. So that's pretty significant. And also a woman named Damaris and a number of others. I find it interesting that Luke mentions those two names. He says a number of others, but who does he highlight? One pagan who's on the inside of the elite group of philosophers, who has incredible influence now, and a woman, a woman named Damaris. Luke is trying to help us understand that the.

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message of the gospel is for everyone. And then a few others, some other people. He really wants to highlight how the gospel is expanding into new groups of people, new genders, new ethnicities, new cultures. That's so much like Luke, especially. in the book of Acts. So what I want to do now is we built the foundation. Let's build the house on top of the foundation. Let's get specific and ridiculously practical about how we as church planners can think about incarnational ecclesiology and translate them into our context.

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Of course, all that I'm going to say, you can put an asterisk next to it. And the footnote of every page will say, this may be different in a pandemic. Okay. So we just need to acknowledge that now that a lot of these were pre-pandemic. And I think we'll be able to do them post-pandemic, but use safety and, you know, be careful as you do that. Keep that in mind as you hear this. So here's how I want to be ridiculously practical. Number one is this, decide to spend significant.

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time learning from your context, especially during the early phases of your church

plan. I think there's a lot of people out there that are doing that. I think there's a lot of people, a slide on that. If not, it's fine. But decide to spend significant time. I know that sounds obvious, but it's amazing how many church planners I know, when they first start out, they assume that they need to be in an office and talking about mission, vision, values, and they need to be studying for great sermons. By the way, all good things. But you've got to learn to spend significant time in your context with a posture of learning.

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View yourself like you would be a reporter, trying to just understand and then communicate back, what is this context like? If you were asked to become a reporter of your community, what would you write about? What would you pick up on? What would you notice as great? What would you notice as being strange? I remember going through this 14 years ago in Richmond, Virginia. And I remember it. One of the sessions, a guy by the name of Doug Paul said, one of the questions that he's thinking through, and he was planting in Richmond, Virginia, was, what's the dirty little thing?

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Second, what's the thing that no one wants to talk about but is really true? So what's the dirty little secret in Williamsburg? What's the dirty little secret in Harrisonburg or in Blacksburg? What's the dirty little secret in New York? What's the dirty little secret in Turks and Caicos that no one really wants to talk about but is really important? What's the dirty little secret in State College PA? So decide to spend significant time learning in your context, especially during the early phases.

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All right? And so then how do we do that? Number two, walk around, especially when the weather is nice. Paul, we see walking around with that keen observation of his context, right? It's easy to try to drive our context or to bike. Those are all good things. Or even to run. But I want to encourage you to walk. Prayer walk. Walk around after dinner in your neighborhood. Just walk around and notice things. Prayer walk, if you've never prayer walked, it's real simple.

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You do two things. You walk and you pray, and that's it. You can do it out loud by yourself and do it quietly. You can do it with others. Just walk and pray with whatever comes to mind. You pray differently in your office, in your home, than you do when you're out walking. You notice things. You see things. You're gripped by things. I've lived in this community for 12 years, and the other day I picked up some Puerto Rican food. I grew up in Puerto Rico.

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I love Puerto Rican food, and we walked and picked it up. And my wife goes, where did you get this? And I said, Amarillo's. And she said, well, how long? Is that a new restaurant? I said, honey, that's been here for like eight years. That's within walking distance of our house. So even though we've lived here a while,

we're still noticing and seeing new things as we do that. So I really want to encourage you to walk, especially when the weather is. nice. Walk and pray. Have ecclesiological eyes open to say, what is the good news for these people? What's the dirty little secret, and how might the gospel speak into that dirty little.

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secret of our community? The third one is this. Interview and ask questions. Exegete your community. Dave Gibbons said this. He said, the locals always know more than you do. The locals always know more than you do. Even if you are a local, the other locals always know more than you do. So talk to as many people as you can. School counselors, city or town council representatives, longtime pastors who've been there more than 20 years, coffee shop baristas,

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longtime business owners, hospital chaplains. I learned more about my community of learning, from hospitals. Hospital chaplains, what was going on? I said to one of them a few years ago, so what are the trends? What are the themes you're noticing? And he said, I cannot tell you how much drug addiction and overdoses we're seeing here in the ER. I cannot tell you how many immigrants are coming through here and are so worried because they have no insurance. I began to learn things about my community I didn't know simply by asking the chaplain what's happening.

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Principals of schools are good. School counselors are way better. They're going to really know what's going on with families. See if you can just say, hey, can I treat you to a cup of coffee? I just want to ask you a few questions. I know you've got HIPAA rules and you've got, you know, legality and confidentiality. But what are some themes or some patterns or some trends you're noticing that are breaking your heart personally? And if there were churches here that really took it seriously to meet the needs, what would those be? So who are the informants and who are the influencers in your community?

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Treat people to coffee. Ask them a set of questions. These could be local politicians. Politicians or teachers, the director of the Historical Society was incredibly helpful for me. I learned more about my community. I expected an hour. At three hours, I was like, dude, I got to go. He was so passionate about it. I probably learned a little more than I should have. But nonetheless, man, he knew the history and could tell me what this community was about. Ask neighbors and business owners and coaches. Keep a notebook.

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It's almost like a journalist's notebook and just write down all that you can, that you can learn. Where are the, quote, unquote, other side of the tracks? They may be literal. They may be metaphorical. But where are the economic dividing lines in your community? And when I get together, sometimes when I keep a

notebook and I ask an informant, I'll say to them, who else would be helpful for me to talk to? And would you be willing to make an introduction for me?

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To do whatever you can to become an expert in your context, in your city. And ask, how can we help? How can we help? For the first three years, I went to just about every Tuesday night borough council meeting here in Lansdale, PA. And I will tell you, they were the most boring meetings I've ever attended in my life. But what I found is if I showed up 15 minutes early, and I stayed 30 minutes afterwards,

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I got a chance to meet the people who were most passionate and committed to serving our community. So I had to sit through 90 minutes, two hours of like the most boring stuff ever. But it was worth it because of the connections I had on the front and the back. And people then said to me, hey, aren't you a pastor? Why do you come to these? And I said, because I'm trying to listen and learn. But I'm also trying to perceive. What are the ways in which our church might be able to be a part of serving? And the only way we can do that is by serving. can know the needs is to listen and be a part of conversations like this and then they say well.

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that's really weird yeah you want to go out for a beer with us afterwards there's like 20 of us are going to go hang out and then we go hang out for a few more hours so look for those ways where people gather where you can really listen well