

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts 17B_Paul's 2nd Journey – Continued - Athens)

Paul and the Philosophers in Athens (17:16-21)

The city of Athens was located about five miles inland from the Aegean Sea. Athens had reached its zenith about 500 years before Paul visited it, in the time of Pericles (461-429 B.C.). During this time in Jewish history, the events of the Book of Nehemiah transpired (c. 445-420 B.C.), and the prophets of the post-Babylonian captivity (Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) were ministering in Israel. So, while God was at work in the tiny nation of Israel preparing them to be used to facilitate the advent of the Messiah, Satan was at work in the empires and cultural centers of the world advancing an order, systems of thought, and institutions that were advancing his strategy of neutralization and elimination of the Truth. Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of the Greek world and its philosophy and culture continued to be advanced throughout even the Roman Empire – the successor on the world scene to the powerful Greek Empire. (Define “Hellenization” here).

As Paul oriented himself in this new city, he couldn't help but observe many of the temples and statues that still stand there today. Today, we would admire these structures for their artistic value and the fact that they represent a culture devoted to learning and intellectual development; however, in Paul's day, they were idols and places of worship that the Greeks regarded as holy.

In verse 16 we should take note of Paul's response to what he observed for there are several things that we can learn from Paul's handling of this situation.

Observation: Note that Paul was moved to compassion by what he observed.

Interpretation: While Paul possessed objectivity as a mature believer and while objectivity is built upon a Biblical understanding of God's essence attributes including God's justice and righteousness, Paul was compassionate toward these people.

Principle: The believer's objectivity should be appropriately balanced with compassion.

Principle: Objectivity and compassion are based upon an accurate understanding of the relationship between the essence of God and God's purpose in human history.

Principle: If the believer only displays objectivity, then the believer does not possess a proper balance of Truth in the soul and will be judgmental.

Principle: If the believer only displays compassion, then the believer does not possess a proper balance of Truth in the soul and will be limited in their impact.

Application: Do you possess the appropriate balance of objectivity and compassion as Paul illustrates in his life?

Idolatry had been Israel's chief sin throughout her history and Paul was very aware of the consequences suffered by his own nation and people. Yet, his own nation and people were the recipients of the promises of Yahweh Himself – a covenant people. Therefore, they had no excuse. The people of Athens were rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ (the incarnate Yahweh) in ignorance even though they were the intellectual capital of the world at that time. Paul observed

their spiritual blindness while they groped about searching for answers in philosophies that were built upon a foundation of anthropocentric, academic speculation, he couldn't help but have compassion for a people and culture that, unlike Israel, had never even heard of Jesus and God's answer to man's sin.

The "marketplace" was the place where the philosophers gathered to discuss and debate and test their views. The "marketplace" or agora was located to the west of the Acropolis (on which the Parthenon still stands today) and Mars Hill.

Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) taught that pleasure was the greatest good and should be the highest pursuit of man. He defined pleasure in terms of peace, tranquility, freedom from pain, freedom from fear (especially the fear of death) and in loving other people. He also believed that if "gods" existed, then they had no interest in human history or affairs. Once his followers adopted his teaching, it was only a logical conclusion that everything happened by chance and there was nothing after death.¹

Epicurus ... may have had the higher forms of pleasure in mind, such as the enjoyment of art and literature, but in Paul's day his followers were given to gross sensualism. They were materialists, basically atheistic, believing that the soul was permanently destroyed by death. Their philosophy is summed up in the words: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor 15:32). This saying, however, is much older than Epicurus. It is what the inhabitants of Jerusalem were saying during the siege of their city (Isa 22:13). The doctrine that pleasure is the chief end man should strive for is known as hedonism, from the Greek word for pleasure. It is a doctrine which pervades much of American society today. One of the marks of the last days is that men shall be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:4)²

The Stoics were followers of the teachings of the first three heads of the Stoic school: the founder, Zeno of Citium in Cyprus (344-262 BC), Cleanthes (d. 232 BC) and Chrysippus (d. ca. 206 BC). The name is derived from 'stoa' which happened to be the particular portico in the Agora (marketplace) where they gathered in Athens. They believed that emotions like fear and envy, passionate love (especially sexual attachments) arose from false understanding and misguided judgments. The sage was defined as a person who had risen above these things, thus the sage had attained moral and intellectual perfection. The sage was utterly immune to misfortune and had attained a state of happiness. There was a great emphasis upon living in harmony with nature and individual self-sufficiency. They held to a pantheistic view of the universe and god and thought that the universe was ruled by an absolute Purpose or Will to which a person needed to conform their individual will, thus achieving a state of virtuous existence.³ Basically, the Stoics believed that personal "salvation" or deliverance came as a result of having achieved a state of indifference to external influences – pleasure or pain. On the other hand, the Epicureans believed that pleasure, including the freedom from pain and fear, should be the chief pursuit of man.

When considering the doctrines of the Stoics, it is important to remember that they think of philosophy not as an interesting pastime or even a particular body of knowledge, but as a way of life. They define philosophy as a kind of practice or

¹ For more information, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epicurus/> or any number of websites and encyclopedias that could be cited as sources.

² Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 110.

³ Ibid.

exercise (*askêsis*) in the expertise concerning what is beneficial (Aetius, 26A). Once we come to know what we and the world around us are really like, and especially the nature of value, we will be utterly transformed. This soteriological element is common to their main competitors, the Epicureans, and perhaps helps to explain why both were eventually eclipsed by Christianity. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius provide a fascinating picture of a would-be Stoic sage at work on himself. The book, also called *To Himself*, is the emperor's diary. In it, he not only reminds himself of the content of important Stoic teaching but also reproaches himself when he realises that he has failed to incorporate this teaching into his life in some particular instance. For the influence of Stoic philosophy on a life in our times, see Admiral James Stockdale's account of his use of the philosophy of Epictetus as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.⁴

Through anthropocentric academic speculation that was divorced from a belief in a God of absolute righteousness, these philosophers had developed brilliant systems of logic and reasoning in their own right. Even though these philosophers were seeking after wisdom, they missed the wisdom of God because their quest was defined and limited by the parameters and boundaries of the human mind and experience. They would never penetrate the veil of human systems of perception that only comes through faith in an omniscient, holy and righteous God. Their systems of logic built upon empiricism and rationalism, as great as they were, would never allow them to understand the unsurpassable riches of the glory of God through His gracious provision. Why? Because, like the religious Jews, their paradigms of thinking could only lead to systems of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness – systems that de-sensitize and harden the heart of man over time to any receptivity to the Truth. This fact is reflected in their arrogant response to the Gospel.

Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18)

For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. (Acts 17:21)

For the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption – that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord." (1 Cor 1:18-31)

⁴ Ibid.

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. (Eph 1:17-21)

These people had incorrectly understood Paul to be speaking of “foreign gods” (17:18) when he spoke of Jesus and the resurrection. They thought that Jesus was a reference to a male deity and the resurrection to be a reference to a female deity.⁵ They accused Paul of being a “babblers” (17:18), a term translated from the Greek word $\sigma\pi\epsilon\rho\mu\omicron\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ (*spermologos*) which means a seed picker and was figurative for one who picks up scraps of knowledge here and there and then passes it off as his own.⁶ In other words, Paul was being accused of having not fully thought through all that he taught. Paul was not an eloquent speaker by his own admission (1 Cor 2:1) and if so, then the philosophers in Athens were ridiculing him arguing that he was not sophisticated enough to be taken seriously.

These philosophers took Paul to the Areopagus (17:19, 22). The term Areopagus is a compound Greek word from “Ares” (the Greek god of war) and “pagus” or hill. (The Latin term for “Ares” was “Mars,” thus it is sometimes referred to as Mars hill).⁷ It was the meeting place for the Council of the Areopagus., the supreme body for judicial and legislative matters in Athens; however, by Paul’s day, its power had been reduced to an oversight role over religion and education.⁸ Here, Paul’s Gospel message would be given a hearing and examined by the supposed experts of philosophy and religion.

Paul’s Address at the Areopagus (17:22-34)

This passage or section of verses in chapter 17 illustrates how Paul dealt with intellectual unbelievers who had little to no knowledge of the God of Hebrew Scriptures. We observe Paul taking a totally different approach to his evangelical apologetic with this category of unbelievers vs. his approach to dealing with Jews, Gentile proselytes and Gentile “God-fearers.” Paul’s sermon in this passage provides us with a good example to follow as we attempt to evangelize in a culture and society that is becoming more pluralistic and ignorant of the content of the Bible.

Paul’s sermon can be divided into three sections. The thrust of the message is very evident. God the Creator has revealed Himself in Creation and has commanded everyone to repent or change their thinking since everyone must give an account to Jesus Christ Whom God raised from the dead. As he delivered this sermon, it would have been quite obvious to the philosophers of Epicurean and Stoic persuasions that this God to Whom Paul referred considered Himself to be supreme and to possess a righteousness that they were incapable of producing.

The Introduction (17:22-23)

⁵ See Earl Radmacher, gen editor, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1852-3 and Baker, *Understanding Acts*, 110.

⁶ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 402-403.

⁷ Baker, *Understanding Acts*, 110.

⁸ Toussaint, “Acts,” 403.

Paul opens his sermon in a very respectful manner toward his hearers. He realizes that these men are thinkers and I believe that Paul had great compassion towards them as men who, like he had been at one time, were simply blinded to the Truth. Paul did not take personal offense at their ridicule, but he saw right through it and probably understood it better than any of his companions who would later join him in Athens. Why? Because, he had been similarly blinded in the past and had gone much farther in his persecution of those who proclaimed the Truth than any of these men. God knew what He was doing in more ways than one when He selected Paul for the work unto which Paul was called.

Observation: Paul proclaimed the Truth boldly in the face of intellectualism.

Observation: Paul understood enough about the philosophies of the intellectuals to recognize the significant error inherent in each; however, Paul was not an expert in these philosophies.

Observation: Paul dealt respectfully with those who did not extend the same courtesy to him.

Interpretation: Paul understood the source of the opposition he had faced.

Application: Proper discernment of the source of opposition is a key to avoiding personalization and internalization of the opposition we face when dealing with unbelief.

Principle: When we personalize or internalize opposition, we will be very tempted (almost without recognizing it) to emotionalize a response.

Paul's familiarity with the philosophies and positions of the Greek intellectuals is manifested in his reference to Greek myth and tragedy. In the 6th Century B.C., a poet from Crete by the name of Epimenides had turned aside a horrible plague from Athens by appealing to a god of whom the people had never heard. An altar in Athens had been built to honor this unknown god – the altar to which Paul referred. Paul knew of this poet for he quoted from him in Titus 1:12 – “One of them, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’”

The Unknown God (17:24-29)

Paul built upon this “unknown” aspect of the divine that had been acknowledged by the Athenians. Paul leveraged this tiny fragment of common truth and constructed his apologetic argument.

In verse 26, the NKJV reads “He has made from one blood...” However, some Greek manuscripts do not contain the word “blood.” Regardless, the intent of Paul's statement in this passage is to acknowledge the fact that man is the only creature who has been created in the image of God – the “offspring of God.” While only in the case of Adam and Eve and the humanity of Jesus do we find evidence of a direct intervention by God in the creation of their physical bodies, the soul of all men is the result of an action on God's part. This image of God has been marred by the Fall in the Garden; however, all men still retain a vestige of the pre-Fall condition in that they have a soul and a physical body that were designed in the image of God.

Under the surface of Paul's statements lay implicit counter-points to Greek belief systems.

- The God proclaimed by Paul did not reside in humanly constructed temples as did the Greek idols (v. 24)
- He is self-sufficient and not dependent upon provision of food offerings from man (v. 25). This would appeal to the Epicureans who believed that if gods existed, they were above human events.

- This God provided life and sustenance (v. 25) and was a view compatible with the Stoic view that humans should align themselves with the “Purpose” of the cosmos.
- The fact that we all have descended from the one common man (v. 26) would have been counter to the Athenian sense of self-righteousness since these philosophers saw themselves as having attained a state of enlightenment that was above other cultures.
- This God actually was in control of the events of human history including the rise and fall of nations (v. 26) – a thought counter to that of the Epicureans, but in line with Stoic philosophy.
- One of God’s purposes in revealing Himself was so that people would seek Him. He is not so far removed from that He cannot be found (v. 27).

To support his statements, Paul again quoted from Greek philosophers and poets. In the first half of verse 28, Paul quotes from Epimenides and in the second half of the verse he quotes from another poet, Aratus who wrote *Phainomena*.

The Message From God (17:30-31)

Although throughout time, Gentiles were responsible for how they responded to the general revelation of God, they were now responsible for the special revelation given by God through the resurrection of Jesus. God had dealt patiently with them in the past even though they were still accountable for their rejection of Him (Romans 1:18ff). However, they now had been provided greater revelation to which they were called to repent.

The idea of a resurrection was incompatible with Greek philosophy. They wanted to get rid of their physical bodies, not get a new physical body. Some have contended that Paul failed in Athens; however, Paul’s experience in Athens just proves that when the minds of men are not open to the Gospel and receptive to truth, there is nothing we can do. It also illustrates just how spiritually devastating of an influence upon the individual’s heart that a societal hardening can be. Paul tells us that “not many wise men after the flesh are called by God” (1 Cor 1:26).