

ACTS  
Paul and the Philosophers  
Acts 17:16-34

Suppose God called you, as a Christian, to present a case for Christianity before the philosophy professors at Harvard and Yale Universities. How would you react? Would you shy away, concluding that you had nothing to offer these intellectuals? Would you think that these brilliant brains would want nothing to do with Christianity, for they almost to the person deny the supernatural? Would you shake with fear believing that these men or women with massive IQ's might laugh at you as a babbling idiot?

It would be a somewhat frightening experience to sit across from these Harvard and Yale professors who are existentialists, atheistic evolutionists, materialists, determinists and relativists committed to the new morality. Yet, this is exactly what Paul faced in his day at Athens. Athens was the university seat of the world. This city had fostered great philosophers such as Pericles, Oemosthenes, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles and Euripides. These famous humanistic philosophers taught patterns of human thought which affected philosophers in Paul's day and still affect philosophers today. In fact, almost all modern day philosophies follow, in some degree, the teachings of these ancient philosophers. Humanistic philosophy has not changed much in three thousand years. Philosophers come and go, and philosophies change their names, labels and terms, but the philosophies of Paul's day are essentially the same humanistic philosophies of our day. What Paul told these first century philosophers is the same thing we must tell the twentieth century philosophers.

THE CONDITION OF ATHENS - Acts 17:16

Athens, the Great City (17:16a )

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, . . .” -- Paul had fled Berea and come to Athens, having left Silas and Timothy in Berea. While he was waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive in Athens, he probably decided to do a little sight-seeing in this magnificent city. Athens was the academic and cultural center of Greece and the whole world. The political and commercial power of Greece had moved to Corinth, but Athens, named after the goddess Athene, still remained the intellectual capital of the world. No city in the ancient world was more distinguished for philosophy, learning and the arts than was Athens. However, when Paul came to Athens, its glory was fading fast, for it was living on its laurels. It had become a decadent, pagan city, given over to pure speculative philosophy, having itching ears for some new truth or experience.

Athens, the Seat of Idolatry (17:16b)

“His spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols.” -- As Paul walked through the city, he saw the abominable idolatry. All the magnificent architecture (temples to gods and goddesses, buildings and theatres) was intimately tied up with their pagan religion. Everywhere Paul turned there were temples, altars and idols dedicated to some god. The greatest temple of all was the Parthenon which was built for Athene, the goddess of wisdom. Then there was the temple of Donita, the goddess of the earth, and the temple of Zeus, the god of war. One ancient writer said that there were 30,000 gods who were worshipped in Athens. Pausanias said, “The Athenians greatly surpassed others in their zeal for religion.” Petronius said humorously, “It was easier to find a god than a man there.” When Paul saw the idolatry, he was agitated within. He had righteous indignation to help these poor, cultured idol worshippers find the one, true and living God as He is revealed in Christ Jesus, the Lord. Paul was angered and compassionate at the same time, but he was disturbed that men who were created to worship God were worshipping idols. They were prostituting their original creation.

Christian, does your spirit have righteous indignation and compassion for people all around you who have made their own idols in their minds--money, power, prestige, pleasure or whatever? Are you disturbed as you see unsaved men

sold out to materialism and godlessness? Are you angered when men laugh and mock Christ and the Bible? You should bet for each Christian must hold forth the true God to this Christ-rejecting world.

It is interesting to note that in this city of philosophy there was the most rampant idolatry. Humanistic philosophy always causes men to set up their own idols and these idols ultimately bring despair to the human soul. This shows the vanity of learning apart from God.

## THE SOLUTION OF PAUL - Acts 17:17-21

### Witnessing to the Pious (17:17a)

“So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, . . .” -- So burdened for the true God and the lost condition of the Athenians, Paul began to preach the gospel of Christ. He knew only Jesus Christ could deliver these people from the darkness of superstition and the vanity of speculative philosophy. Paul first went to the synagogue as was his custom, and there preached to the religious Jews and Jewish proselytes. These pious Jews were not idolaters, but their religion was so weak and powerless that it could not deliver the city from idolatry and vain wisdom. Apparently, Paul could not in any way move these hardened religious Jews towards Christ.

### Witnessing to the Plain Man (17:17b)

“And in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.” -- The market place was not only a place to buy and sell, but it also had a daily public forum in which all kinds of subjects were discussed. The common man would pick up much of the philosophical thinking of the day by hearing these teachers in the forum. Paul jumped right into the middle of these discussions and witnessed for Christ. These plain folk were gripped by idolatry, fear and superstition and they needed Christ desperately. Paul spent the whole day “rapping” about Christ.

Notice that Paul went to the masses with the gospel. He did not hang a sign outside his apartment which said, “Revival” or “Evangelistic Services.” He never expected the sinner to come to him but Paul went out after the sinner to give him the gospel of Christ.

### Witnessing to the Philosophical Man (17:18-21)

“And also some of the Epicureans and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him.” -- It was inevitable that Paul would encounter the philosophers. The two philosophies Paul faced were Epicureanism and Stoicism. An Epicurean was a follower of Epicurus who lived 300 years before the Christian era. This philosophy denied that the world was created by God, and that the gods exercised any care or providence over human affairs. Epicureans were atheistic materialists who denied the immortality of the soul or body. One distinguishing doctrine of Epicureanism was that pleasure was the chief good, and that virtue was to be practiced only as it contributed to pleasure. For Epicureans, life consisted only of the here and now, and, therefore, men should get the most out of life. This philosophy deteriorated so as to greatly feed the base desires of man's flesh. The ultimate goal of life was to pursue pleasure, for the pursuit of happiness is the summum bonum of existence. They took as their motto, “Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.” These Epicureans would be what we would call modern day existentialists and new moralists who teach “If it feels good, do it.” An existentialist believes in living for the existence of the moment. Another distinguishing doctrine of Epicureanism was that the world was governed by chance. There is no real meaning to life; it is all luck, and dependent on Lady Fortune. Epicureans are forerunners of modern day naturalistic evolutionists who blatantly speak of the world coming into existence by chance by a big bang in which certain atoms happened accidentally to combine to make an explosion so as to form the universe and the world. Then the world, after this, is run by the forces of evolution. For an Epicurean, there was no life beyond the grave, death ends it all, so there is nothing to fear ultimately and nothing to hope for ultimately. A Stoic, on the other hand, was a follower of the philosopher Zeno who lived also about 300 years before Christ. The doctrine of this group was that the world was created by God (a force) but that all things were fixed by Fate, even God Himself was subject to Fate. That is, a blind, impersonal force was directing everything, so that we are not left to chance but to Fate. This philosophy of Stoicism led to fatalism, and is the forerunner of modern day determinism. The Stoic taught that all the Fates were to

be submitted to, and that the passions and affections were to be restrained and suppressed. Happiness comes in overcoming pain. The Stoic's attitude towards life was one of resignation. They prided themselves in taking whatever Fate brought their way. Their attitude was "grin and bear it." This philosophy is often expressed in our culture by saying, "If a bullet has your number on it, there is nothing you can do about it, so don't worry." Men are to take whatever comes and handle it the best way they can. A Stoic also was a pantheist. He believed matter was eternal and that God is in everything and everything is in God, so God does not stand outside His created world. Pantheism is seen in most of the Eastern religion and philosophy of our day.

Philosophy really hasn't changed much in 3,000 years, and modern day non-Christians really haven't improved their philosophies too much from that of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Zeno and others.

Someone has said that the difference between an Epicurean (materialist) and a Stoic (pantheist) is that a materialist puts God so far out of His creation, He can't get in; the pantheist puts God so far into His creation, He can't get out -- to hear and to help humans.

"And some were saying, 'What would this idle babbler (seed picker) wish to say?'" -- The Epicureans, who were atheistic materialists, were contemptuous of what they heard from Paul. They treated him with hateful disdain. They called Paul a low-down seed picker; that is, they considered him a novice in philosophy who had a grain of truth here and there, but no full-blown philosophical system. To them Paul was like a bird who picks a seed here and there.

"Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,' -- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." -- There were some, perhaps the Stoics, who out of pure curiosity were interested in what Paul had to say. Apparently, they thought Paul was introducing two new gods, Jesus and Anastasis. Anastasis is the Greek word for resurrection.

"And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean.'" -- The interest of these Athenians was purely philosophical and there was no spiritual implication whatsoever. The Areopagus was a court of judges who had the final authority in Athens. This court gave the OK to erect another temple or altar to a new god. This court may have met on Mars Hill or in the marketplace.

"(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)" -- The Athenians had itching ears and always wanted to hear or tell something "newer." Demosthenes rebuked the Athenians for running around and asking the question, "What news?" Their endless speculative philosophy led them to hear a new truth, find a new god, erect a new altar or experience something new. They could never be satisfied because they had never found the truth. They were forever seeking and never coming to the knowledge of the truth.

THE SERMON BY PAUL - Acts 17:22-29

Introduction - 17:22-23

Commendation (17:22)

"And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.'" -- Paul began with a most thoughtful and respectful introduction. He began this tactful introduction where the people were, and in one respect he commends them for at least having a concept of religion. He did not denounce their philosophy or their idolatry, and he praised them for what he could.

If these Athenians were so religious, why did Paul go tell them about Christ? Their religion was paganism and motivated by demons. They were religious, but they were not born again from above. They were not Christians who had been touched by God's grace and received Christ as Savior. Religion saves no one. Just because a person goes to church does not make him a Christian. All Protestants are not Christians. All Roman Catholics are not

Christians. All Evangelicals are not Christians. They may be religious but religion means nothing to God. A person must be saved by bowing his will to Christ as Lord and Savior.

### Observation (17:23)

“For while I was passing through and examining the objects of worship, I also found an altar with the inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.” -- While strolling through Athens, Paul discovered an altar to an unknown god. There was probably more than one of these altars in Athens. There is a historical reason for the altars to the unknown god. Many centuries before there was a terrible plague in Athens and many died. It seemed that the city would be wiped out by pestilence. Epimenides took many white and black sheep to the Areopagus and let them go free throughout the city. Wherever the sheep were found, they were to be slain as a sacrifice to this special, unknown god. When the sheep were slain, an altar was erected at that place to the unknown god. The pestilence subsided. The Athenians did not know who the unknown god was but Paul did. Paul knew the true God and he proclaimed the true God to these pagan philosophers.

Notice very carefully how Paul approaches this sermon. He does not argue from the viewpoint of their religion or philosophy. He does not begin with some first principle or talk about presuppositions. He begins with divine revelation. He assumes the existence of God, and while he does not quote the Old Testament, Paul does use correct biblical and theological concepts about God. He started his sermon by talking about the God of revelation.

### Content 17:24-29

#### God Is the Creator (17:24a)

“The God who made the world and all things in it, . . .” -- The world is not left to chance or to some impersonal Fate. The world was created by an all-wise, all-powerful and loving God. Matter is not eternal but is made by a sovereign God. Furthermore, God is the Maker, not the thing made. God is not created by man in sticks and stones but it is God who made man and everything else that exists in this universe. God is not a projection of man but God is greater than man, transcendent above His universe.

#### God Is Immense (17:24b)

“Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; . . .” -- God is Lord of the earth and the universe, and He cannot be contained in man-made temples because He is a Spirit. God fills the whole of space and overflows space. He is everywhere present and completely present at every point in the universe; yet as the Creator, He is separate from it. To make an idol of God or a temple to hold God is to make a mockery of God as Spirit who fills His universe with His own presence.

#### God Is Self-Sufficient (17:25a)

“Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, . . .” -- God is the giver and does not have any needs Himself. Pagan idolatry taught that men had to please the gods, bring gifts to the gods, make sacrifices to the gods and serve the gods. However, the true God is the giver of everything, and He in no way needs man, but it is man who desperately needs God.

#### God Is the Preserver (17:25b)

“Since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; . . .” -- The true God has providential control over His world, for, because of Him, men live and draw every breath. All men, whether they recognize it or not, are dependent on God for their very existence, and it is He who gives His creatures all things. How arrogant and stupid it is for men to declare their independency of God. With one simple command God can stop a man's breathing and snuff out his life!

#### God Is the Originator of Man (17:26a)

“And He made from one every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, . . .” -- Paul declared that God made the human race one family, descending from one progenitor, Adam. We know that this is a scientifically sound statement, for science admits today that there is only one race of man, one species, Homosapians. Despite differences of pigment, stature and features in the human race, all men came from one source.

This statement was a real blow to the Athenian’s racial pride. They thought themselves superior to all men because they were Greeks who spoke the Greek language, and all others were barbarians. The Athenians also felt themselves superior to all Greeks because they believed that they evolved from the soil of Athenian land. Paul said that these Athenians were not some special section of humanity, but were made of the same stuff as the rest of mankind.

All kinds of racial prejudices are shot down in this one verse. Hitler thought the Germans were the super race. Some whites think they are superior to blacks. Racial prejudice is a horrible sin and one of the hardest attitudes to break.

### God Is the Governor of History (17:26b, 27)

“Having determine their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, . . .” -- An all-wise, sovereign God has a predetermined plan for this world. This plan is not based on His foreknowledge whereby He looks down the corridors of time and sees how all things will turn out and then sets His plan. No, God knows how all things are going to turn out because He has a plan. “Appointed times” refers to the fact that God is in control of the rise and fall of nations and cultures. God is also providentially governing the world in which He has set man's boundaries. He has determined where men shall live and how long they will live there. God has distributed people allover this earth for He is the governor of history.

“That they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; . . .” -- God has placed every man where he is on the face of the earth and in the culture he lives in order to seek the true God. God did not make an arbitrary decision, but God predestinates out of a loving heart and expects men to seek Him wherever they are in this world. God is very near every man because He is everywhere present. If men will but seek Him, they will find Him. “And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

God allows catastrophes, wars, violence and hard times so that men will seek Him, and acknowledge their dependence on Him. It is pure self-delusion, ridiculous and absurd to think that anyone can operate without God. The reason men think they can exist apart from God is that they have placed some idol, whether physical or mental, as a substitute for God in their lives.

### God Is Immanent (17:28a)

“For in Him we live and move and exist, . . .” -- God is so close to each person and it is by Him we live and move and exist. The true God does not want men to depend on idols, whether physical or mental, but on Him. He wants men to acknowledge that they are totally dependent upon Him for everything.

### God Is the Parent of Man (17:28b, 29)

“As even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His offspring.’ Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.” -- Paul, being a good preacher, quoted from two Greek poets, Arastus and Cleanthes, who were Stoics, to show that the Greeks believed that men were the creatures of God, and not the creation of man. Man is a sinner but he was originally created in the image of God; therefore man has value and worth as a human. It is not biblical to say that man is nothing. It is true he can do nothing to save himself because he is a sinner, but he is not “nothing.” He is a creature of God, created in the image of God, and of great value, even though he is sinful because of the Fall.

### Appeal (17:30, 31)

## Call to Repentance (17:30)

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, . . .” -- Some have taken the words “times of ignorance” to refer to the ages of paganism before the coming of Christ into this world. They say that until Christ came God withheld execution of physical judgment upon these Gentile nations. However, “the times of ignorance” may also refer to the life of an individual before conversion. There are times in one's life, as an offspring of God, a creature of God, that one tries to satisfy himself with things that are less than God. These are times of ignorance when men walk in independence of God, forming various idols in their minds. God overlooks these times. He does not bring immediate judgment to the person, waiting patiently for the person to repent. God now calls upon everybody everywhere to repent. When confronted with the truth of Christ, men are to execute their human responsibility and repent; that is, change the mind about idolatry, ignorance, sin, God, Christ and a sinful life style, and receive Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Notice that God does not ask men to repent but commands them to repent.

## Certainty of Judgment (17:31)

“Because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” -- Paul began his sermon with God and ends it with the truth that God has an appointed day in the future when He will judge the world through Jesus Christ. This is an inescapable judgment when the secrets of all men will be made evident. Men shall be judged by a holy God and cast into hell because they are sinners, without a Savior, who failed to repent of their negative attitudes about God, Christ and godly living. A resurrected Christ will be involved in this judgment, and this was a shocker to the Stoics who only believed in the immortality of the soul and not the body.

Judgment day is coming for all men whether they believe in Christ and a future judgment or not. Just because men believe there will be no future judgment, does not make it truth. Judgment is certain and men without Christ will be cast into outer darkness where there is gnashing of teeth and eternal separation from God.

Paul calmly, politely and tactfully told these mighty philosophers they were going to be eternally judged if they did not embrace Christ as Lord and Savior, and accept the Christian philosophy of life, death and eternity.

## THE REACTION OF THE HEARERS - Acts 17:32-34

### Repudiation (17:32a)

“Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, . . .” -- The Epicureans could not accept a hereafter or a bodily resurrection so they mocked Paul, laughing him to scorn. Paul took the scorn graciously because he knew that God would have the last laugh.

### Procrastination (17:32b)

“But others said, ‘We shall hear you again.’” -- These were undoubtedly the Stoics who were sincere in their desire to know more about Christ, but they were also procrastinators. As far as we know, they never heard Paul a second time. These scholars succumbed to the curse of the intellectual. They were guilty of academic detachment. They were remotely interested in Christ but only in an academic sense. Procrastination in receiving Christ can be just as fatal as total rejection of Christ.

There is a story of Satan having a “planning session” in hell. He asks, “How shall we ruin the souls of men?” One demon stands up and says, “I will go and start a great movement. I will tell men that God is dead.” “No, that won't work,” replied Satan, “We've already tried it. There is too much evidence for God in the design of creation. Men know there is a God.” Another demon stood up and said, “I've got a plan! I'll go tell men the Bible is not true.” Satan said, “We've worked a lot on that and haven't had a great deal of success. There is something about the Bible that is self-authenticating.” A third demon stood up and said, “I will go and tell men there is a God, the Bible is His

Word, Jesus is the Son and He did die for them . . . but there is still time. They don't really have to come to repentance and faith in Him just yet. I will tell them to eat, drink and be merry today because they can always repent tomorrow!" Then Satan stood up and said, "Now, you've got something! That will do the job! Procrastination will ruin the souls of many, many men!"

#### Appropriation (17:33, 34)

"So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed among whom also was Dionysus the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them." -- The vast majority of the philosophers in Athens rejected Christ, but some did believe. God had decreed that some in the Areopagus would believe and turn to Christ. Even one of the judges of the court, Dionysius, received Christ. There was also a famous woman, perhaps a philosopher, Damaris, who yielded her life to Christ as Savior and Lord. What does this tell us? God saves some intellectuals. It is God's plan to save all types and kinds of men. Yet, not many wise in the world are saved.

"For consider your call, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, than no man should boast before God" (I Cor. 1:26-29).

When the gospel is preached to the academic world, some are going to be saved.

#### CONCLUSION

What, my friend, is your reaction to Christ? Do you mock and sneer as the Epicureans at the supernatural and the resurrection, refusing to believe you are a sinner under judgment in need of a Savior and repentance? A man mocks either out of ignorance of the facts or as a front to cover up his inward conviction about Christ. Perhaps you, as the Stoics, are interested in the message of Christ but you are procrastinating about true repentance and surrender to Christ. You say, "I'll put off my decision until tomorrow." Tomorrow may never come and then you will face an angry God at the Final Judgment.

Perhaps you will be like Dionysius and Damaris. You have heard that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, both undiminished deity and perfect humanity, who died for sinners and was raised from the dead to give men resurrection life. Dionysius and Damaris heard and repented. They changed their attitudes about Christ, and sin, and received Jesus as Savior and bowed to Him as Lord. Have you repented? Have you bowed to Christ as Lord and received Him as Savior? Do not put this commitment off. There may be no tomorrow!