

Acts 17:16-34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 17 verses 16 to 34. Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him, and some said, What does this babbling wish to say? Others said, He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities, because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship,

I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being. As even some of your own poets have said, for we are indeed his offspring. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, We will hear you again about this. So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Amaris, and others with them. Facing a threat to his safety earlier in Acts chapter 17, Paul was moved away from Berea by some of the believers in verse 15. Paul was now in Athens alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him.

No longer a great centre of power and population, the population of Athens had dwindled considerably by Paul's day. Once one of the most powerful cities in the world, Athens was now overshadowed by the Roman city of Corinth. Athens still had considerable symbolic value on account of its continuing association with culture and learning. Paul was deeply distressed at the abundance of idols and images within the city. This reaction was a characteristically Jewish one, much that Paul says in this passage will reflect common Jewish polemics against idolatry.

Consistent with the general pattern of his missionary work, Paul first focuses upon the synagogue, where he reasons daily with the Jews and with Gentile worshippers. He also speaks to the wider population within the marketplace.

[3 : 4 6] Among the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who encounter him, the accusation is made that he is a babbling or seed picker and a proclaimer of foreign gods. They seem to think that he's just a dabbler.

He picks up one philosophical notion here, another over there, and strings them together without any thought to how it all fits. These charges challenge both Paul's spiritual authority and the right of the religion that he proclaimed to a place within Athenian life. Some commentators have suggested

that the second charge, that Paul proclaimed foreign gods, arose from the misconception that resurrection was a female deity alongside Jesus. This charge also recalls the charge that was made against Socrates.

This is not the first time that Luke seems to have referred to Socrates within his text. In chapter 5 verse 29 there is another allusion to Socrates, as the apostles speak about the fact that they must obey God rather than the man. In aligning Paul with Socrates in this manner, Luke presents him as wise and the Athenians as foolish and repeating the mistakes of their ancestors. This likely serves Luke's apologetic ends.

Paul is then brought to the Areopagus. Whether this is a situation resembling a formal trial or merely an attempt by a curious counsel to get a clearer sense of where Paul's teaching stands is unclear. The softened form of the challenge to Paul might suggest the latter. The description of the Athenians and the foreigners of the city is not a flattering one. They are, as Luke characterises them, driven by a lazy and faddish curiosity rather than by a genuine love for and commitment to the truth. Robert Garland has argued that there were three criteria for the introduction of a new religion to the city of Athens. First, the sponsor must claim to represent a deity. Second, he must provide evidence that the deity is eager to reside in Athens. And third, the deity's residence in Athens must benefit Athenians as a mark of its goodwill. In the speech that follows, Paul subversively addresses each of these conditions. The manner of Paul's speech provides evidence of his scholarly training. His opening reference to the extreme religiousness of the Athenians has an ambiguity that he will proceed to exploit. As a reference to the piety of his audience, it could be regarded as a shrewd attempt to create a favourable impression. However, through his reference to the altar of the unknown god,

Paul paints a picture of an excessive superstitious piety. In the saturated market of Athenian idolatry, Paul identifies this monument to uninformed devotion as an object that epitomises the religion of the city, a religion characteristic of the times of human ignorance that he discusses in verse 30.

[6 : 32] Paul declares the transcendence and the sovereignty of God as the creator of all things. This deity is related to all human beings and is involved in the life and the destiny of the race. God's engagement in and ordering of humanity's life occurs in order that humanity might grope for him and find him. Such a transcendent deity, who is reflected in humanity as his offspring, cannot appropriately be represented by inanimate idols of our own creation. Having introduced this transcendent, personal, providentially active deity, intimately engaged in human affairs, Paul proclaims the end of the age of ignorance and groping in the darkness with the revelation of Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation and judgment.

This message might remind us of one of the earlier run-ins that Paul had with idolatry, back in Lystra in chapter 14, where Paul delivered a similar message in verses 15 to 17.

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men of like nature with you, and we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. While Paul is speaking to pagans, he is presenting them with a message that is very clearly shaped by a Jewish understanding of divine creation and providence. This is not a God who is distanced from the world, rather he is a God who is very close to everyone. He is a God who is our Father, and he is the God in whom we live and move and have our being. He is the God who directs the affairs of men. He has divided the nations, appointed their times and their places of habitation, and now he is brought to an end the age of their ignorance, calling all people to respond to the message of Christ, who holds the destiny of the whole human race within his hands. He is the one who will judge all, something that's demonstrated by the fact that he was raised from the dead. The religious marketplace of the Athenians may seem rather remote from that of the more secular world that we inhabit. However, we can learn much from Paul's approach to the Athenians, particularly from Paul's initial move. As Timor-Shalik argues, the altar to an unknown God is precisely the most appropriate place for proclaiming the Christian message. He claims,

I am convinced that if anyone wants to preach the good news of the paradoxical God of the Bible, he has to find the altar to an unknown God. To speak about Christ at the altar to familiar gods would be blasphemy, or risk even greater misunderstanding than on that occasion at the Athenian

Areopagus. While Paul speaks of the altar to the unknown God, and announces that he is proclaiming that God to them, we should observe that although he is finding common ground, he is completely subverting their religious system. The God that Paul proclaims cannot just be fitted into the existing pantheon as yet another God to be worshipped. He overturns the whole pantheon. He is, as Paul presents him, the God that shows the futility of all idolatry. He is the one true God, and he is beyond the control or the representation of man. Paul's message at the Areopagus received a lukewarm response. His declaration of a God who lays claim to humanity in Jesus Christ, his revealed and appointed agent of blessing and judgment, cut entirely against the grain of both speculative and superstitious religion, the forms of religion that prevailed in the city of Athens. The listless Athenian preoccupation with hearing something new was answered with a demand for absolute commitment. The darkness of superstition was scattered by the dazzling light of divine revelation. The council desiring to cast judgment on a new religion found itself called to account before the bar of heaven. It is this same message that we are called to declare to the powers and the rulers and the thinkers of our own age. In our societies, God is often experienced as the thoroughly known God, the God who holds no surprises. We can talk about ourselves as living in Christian countries, and this claim, although it can be an encouraging one for some Christians to hear, should excite some concerns. In the comfortable alignment of Christianity and our national heritage and identity and culture, God is easily rendered familiar and unthreatening, a tame and mute idol to our cultural and social values. This sort of dynamic can especially be seen in civil religion, where Christian values are routinely appealed to with the assurance that they align in all the same principles and principles and principles and principles and principles and principles. In responding to this, we must join with Paul in proclaiming the transcendent God, who stands above and orders all human affairs, sustaining and upholding us in existence, closer to us than closeness itself.

[11 : 25] This God alludes all attempts to reduce him to an object of our mastery. Like Paul, we must locate the gaps in the captive webs of our cultural idolatries, declaring the identity of our God from these points, and calling all to account. A question to consider, how does Paul's speech on the Areopagus represent something of the conflict between Jewish and Christian patterns of religion and belief, and the patterns of religious belief that were more common in a Hellenistic context?