

“A SIN RUINED WORLD RIDICULES GOD”

Acts 17:16-34

INTRODUCTION:

According to a recent Barna Research Group survey, 73% of people in the USA today believe, "God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfect Creator." But this means 27% of Americans hold radically different conceptions of the nature of God.

So, on average, one in four people met during evangelistic efforts will have completely non-biblical viewpoints about God (and life in general). And even among the 73% category, there are probably many whose worldviews are not fully biblical.

But, "It is reassuring to remember that the apostle Paul also encountered a pluralistic culture, as exemplified by his speech to the folks at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34). His approach to the Athenians of his day models for us the methodology that we should use" (Enroth, p.vii).

Paul arrived in the great city of Athens, not as a sightseer, but as a soul-winner. The late Noel O. Lyons, for many years director of the Greater Europe Mission, used to say, “**Europe is looked over by millions of visitors and is overlooked by millions of Christians.**” Europe needs the Gospel today just as it did in Paul’s day, and we dare not miss our opportunities. Like Paul, we must have open eyes and broken hearts.

Acts 17:16,17:

Now while Paul waited for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

Be sure to note Paul's reaction to seeing the nature of God being perverted by idol worship, "his spirit was provoked within him." Moreover, he didn't just brood over this; it provoked him to action. He began witnessing to the Athenians.

In accordance with his principle of "to the Jew first" (Rom 1:16), he began in the synagogue. Here and initially "in the marketplace" he encountered Jews and "Gentile worshipers." The latter would have been "God-fearers" - people who had accepted the Jewish religion up to but not including circumcision (Acts 13:16,26).

Both of these groups accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as being the inspired Word of God and would believe that God is the infinite, personal Creator of the universe.

“Left at Athens alone” (1 Thes. 3:1), Paul viewed the idolatrous city and his spirit was “stirred” (same word as “contention” in **Acts 15:39** —“paroxysm”). Therefore, he used what opportunities were available to share the Good News of the Gospel.

As was his custom, he “dialogued” in the synagogue with the Jews, but he also witnessed in the marketplace (*agora*) to the Greeks. Anyone who was willing to talk was welcomed by Paul to his daily “classes.”

It did not take long for the philosophers to hear about this “new thing” that was going on in the *agora*, and they came and listened to Paul and probably debated with him. As they listened, they gave two different responses. One group ridiculed Paul and his teachings and called him a “babbling.” The word literally means “birds picking up seed,” and it refers to someone who collects various ideas and teaches as his own the secondhand thoughts he borrows from others. It was not a very flattering description of the church’s greatest missionary and theologian.

The second group was confused but interested. They thought Paul believed as they themselves did in many gods, because he was preaching “Jesus and Anastasis” (the Greek word for “resurrection”). The word translated “preached” in **Acts 17:18** means “to preach the Gospel.” Those who say that Paul modified his evangelistic tactics in Athens, hoping to appeal to the intellectuals, have missed the point. He preached the Gospel as boldly in Athens as he did in Berea and would do in Corinth.

Acts 17:18:

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

Paul next encounters Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. In doing so, he is now dealing with people whose conception of God is radically different from the others.

The Epicureans were "deistic polytheists." Deists today believe there is a God who created the universe. But they believe after He did so he is no longer involved with its operation. In other words, they deny the idea of miracles, the sovereignty or providence of God, the efficacy of prayer, and even the possibility of having a relationship with God. These ideas lead to a denial of any kind of afterlife.

A better term for this idea might be "practical atheist" i.e.. a person who says he believes in God but this makes no practical difference in his day to day life. Many included in the above 73% category could possibly be described in this way.

But the Epicureans were also polytheists. They believed there are many gods, not just one. But again, none of these gods are involved in human affairs. On the other hand, the Stoics, were pantheists. They taught everything is God. This view is seen today within the New Age Movement.

The Stoics further believed that "Fate" (whatever that is) ordained all things that were to come to pass. This again would include a denial of the Biblical concept of a personal God being in control of human history (see Dan 2:21; 4:34,35).

And finally, these people misunderstood Paul in thinking he was "a proclaimer of foreign gods." They took the Greek word for resurrection (*anastasis*) as being the name of a god in addition to Jesus.

Athens was in a period of decline at this time, though still recognized as a center of culture and education. The glory of its politics and commerce had long since faded. It had a famous university and numerous beautiful buildings, but it was not the influential city it once had been. The city was given over to a "cultured paganism" that was nourished by idolatry, novelty (**Acts 17:21**), and philosophy.

“The Greek religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature,” wrote Conybeare and Howson in their classic *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*. “It was a religion which ministered to art and amusement, and was entirely destitute of moral power” (pp. 280-281). The Greek myths spoke of gods and goddesses that, in their own rivalries and ambitions, acted more like humans than gods; and there were plenty of deities to choose from! One wit jested that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. Paul saw that the city was “wholly given to idolatry,” and it broke his heart.

We today admire Greek sculpture and architecture as beautiful works of art, but in Paul’s day, much of this was directly associated with their religion.

- ❖ Paul knew that idolatry was demonic (**1 Cor. 10:14-23**),
- ❖ That the many gods of the Greeks were only characters in stories who were unable to change men’s lives (**1 Cor. 8:1-6**).
- ❖ With all of their culture and wisdom, the Greeks did not know the true God (**1 Cor. 1:18-25**).

As for novelty, it was the chief pursuit of both the citizens and the visitors (**Acts 17:21**). Their leisure time was spent telling or hearing “some new thing.” Eric Hoffer wrote that “**the fear of becoming a ‘has been’ keeps some people from becoming anything.**”

The person who chases the new and ignores the old soon discovers that he has no deep roots to nourish his life. He also discovers that nothing is really new; it’s just that our memories are poor (**Ecc. 1:8-11**).

ECC 1:8 All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

ECC 1:9 That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

ECC 1:10 Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us.

ECC 1:11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come by those who will come after.

The city was also devoted to philosophy. When you think of Greece, you automatically think of Socrates and Aristotle and a host of other thinkers whose works are still read and studied today. Newspaper columnist Franklin P. Adams once defined philosophy as “**unintelligible answers to insoluble problems,**” but the Greeks would not have agreed with him.

They would have followed Aristotle who called philosophy “the science which considers truth.”

Paul had to confront two opposing philosophies as he witnessed in Athens, those of the Epicureans and the Stoics. We today associate the word *Epicurean* with the pursuit of pleasure and the love of “fine living,” especially fine food. But the Epicurean philosophy involved much more than that. **In one sense, the founder Epicurus was an “existentialist” in that he sought truth by means of personal experience and not through reasoning. The Epicureans were materialists and atheists, and their goal in life was pleasure. To some, “pleasure” meant that which was grossly physical; but to others, it meant a life of refined serenity, free from pain and anxiety.**

The true Epicurean avoided extremes and sought to enjoy life by keeping things in balance, but pleasure was still his number one goal.

The Stoics rejected the idolatry of pagan worship and taught that there was one “World God.” They were pantheists, and their emphasis was on personal discipline and self-control. Pleasure was not good and pain was not evil. The most important thing in life was to follow one’s reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances.

Of course, such a philosophy only fanned the flames of pride and taught men that they did not need the help of God. It is interesting that the first two leaders of the Stoic school committed suicide.

The Epicureans said “Enjoy life!” and the Stoics said “Endure life!” but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God’s risen Son.

Acts 17:19-21:

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but to either tell or to hear something new.

The Athenians now wanted Paul to clarify his "new doctrine." They also had an insatiable appetite for "hearing something new." So Paul was taken to the Areopagus.

The Areopagus was the center of the Athenian religion and the location of the religious leaders of the city. Paul would need the approval of this group of men to be allowed to continue preaching in Athens.

Acts 17:22,23:

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."

Paul begins his sermon by telling the Athenians they are "very religious." Now some believe this phrase is a compliment. The idea being, Paul is "buttering-up" his hearers so they will be more receptive to what he has to say.

However, the word can also be translated "superstitious" (see the KJV). And besides, in the Roman world virtually everyone was "religious." So Paul is probably simply making a statement of fact to set up his next observation.

While walking around Athens, Paul found an altar "to an unknown god." In fact, there were many altars in ancient Athens with this inscription. The pagans of the day wanted to make sure they didn't "miss" any god lest someday he (or she) should show up and be angry at them for not being worshipped. They would be able to point to one of these altars and say "This is your altar; we have been worshipping you."

Paul used this ignorance about the true nature of God as his starting point.

Acts 17:24,25:

"God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things."

In these verses, Paul mentions four attributes of the true God. The first is, God is Creator. So the Epicurean belief in many gods is false. There is only one God and He made "everything." Further the pantheistic beliefs of the Stoics (and New Agers) is false since, being the Creator, God is distinct from His creation.

Second, Paul alludes to the Sovereignty of God, "He is Lord" over everything which He has made. Third, he hints at the Omnipresence of God; He cannot be confined in a temple (see 1 Kings 8:27).

And finally, Paul proclaims God is Self-existent. He does not need anything, including the sacrifices the pagans offered to their gods. But we are dependent on Him for our very lives!

The Council of the Aeropagus was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city, so it was natural for them to investigate the "new doctrine" Paul was teaching. They courteously invited Paul to present his doctrine at what appears to have been an informal meeting of the council on Mars' Hill.

Paul was not on trial; the council members only wanted him to explain what he had been telling the people in the *agora*. After all, life in Athens consisted in hearing and telling new things, and Paul had something new!

Paul's message is a masterpiece of communication. He started where the people were by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown god. Having aroused their interest, he then explained who that God is and what He is like. He concluded the message with a personal application that left each council member facing a moral decision, and some of them decided for Jesus Christ.

Paul opened his address with a compliment: **“I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22, niv)**. They were so religious, in fact, that they even had an altar to “the unknown god,” lest some beneficent deity be neglected. If they did not know this god, how could they worship him? Or how could he help them? It was this God that Paul declared.

In this message, which is similar to his sermon at Lystra (**Acts 14:15-17**), Paul shared four basic truths about God.

The greatness of God: He is Creator (v. 24)

Every thinking person asks, “Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?” Science attempts to answer the first question, and philosophy wrestles with the second; but only the Christian faith has a satisfactory answer to all three. The Epicureans, who were atheists, said that all was matter and matter always was. The Stoics said that everything was God, “the Spirit of the Universe.” God did not create anything; He only organized matter and impressed on it some “law and order.”

But Paul boldly affirmed, “In the beginning, God!” God made the world and everything in it, and He is Lord of all that He has made. He is not a distant God, divorced from His creation; nor is He an imprisoned God, locked in creation. He is too great to be housed in man-made temples (**1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:1-2; Acts 7:48-50**), but He is not too great to be concerned about man’s needs (**Acts 17:25**). We wonder how the Council members reacted to Paul’s statement about temples, for right there on the Acropolis were several shrines dedicated to Athena.

The goodness of God; He is Provider (v. 25)

Men may pride themselves in serving God, but it is God who serves man. If God is God, then He is self-sufficient and needs nothing that man can supply. Not only do the temples not contain God, but the services in the temples add nothing to God! In two brief statements, Paul completely wiped out the entire religious system of Greece!

It is God who gives to us what we need: “life, and breath, and all things.” God is the source of every good and perfect **gift (James 1:17)**. He gave us life and He sustains that life by His goodness (**Matt. 5:45**). It is the goodness of God that should lead men to repentance (**Rom. 2:4**). But

instead of worshiping the Creator and glorifying Him, men worship His creation and glorify themselves (**Rom. 1:18-25**).

Acts 17:26,27:

"And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and He has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;"

Now Paul deals with a false notion which led to a superior attitude among the Greeks. They believed their race originated from their own Attic homeland and was thus different from the rest of mankind. But Paul informs them the one, true God made all peoples "from one blood." No race is superior to another, not then or now. Paul then strikes right at their wrong concept of history. God "determines" the course of human history, not "Fate" - and neither is "chance" (again, whatever that is) and mere human efforts as is propagated by Humanists today.

Thus, any "deistic" notions of God are also contradicted. God is intimately involved in human affairs. He even wants us to "seek" Him. And any number of people can "find" Him and have a relationship with Him since He is infinite, "He is not far from each one of us" (see Jer 23:23,24).

Acts 17:28:

"for in Him we live and move and have our being,' as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'"

Paul now quotes from two different Grecian writers. The first quote is from Epimenides (c. 600 BC). The second is by Aratus (c. 300 BC). Paul also quotes from Aratus in Titus 1:12. In their original contexts, both quotes are referring to Zeus, the main god of Grecian mythology.

These quotes raise a couple of important points about Paul's evangelistic methods. First, it should be noted, nowhere in this sermon does Paul quote from the Hebrew Scriptures. Since his hearers do not believe the Bible has any authority, let alone that it is the Word of God, this would have been a waste of time. He has, although, been presenting many Biblical concepts.

The same would be true today. Quoting the Bible to people who don't trust it will probably just "turn them off." However, the Christian needs to be prepared to present Biblical concepts "to anyone who asks" (see 1Pet 3:15).

Second, "When Paul addressed the Athenians, he made it clear that he had studied them and that he was listening to them" (Enroth, p.viii; Prov 15:28; 18:13).

But what was Paul's purpose in quoting from the Athenian's own philosophers? The answer to this question requires a look at the next verse of the sermon.

Acts 17:29:

"Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising."

The Athenian's own philosophers had taught that they were dependent on God and had been created by Him. But an important part of their religious tradition involved making idols to worship as gods and taking care of them.

Paul is pointing out the inherent contradiction here. In essence he is asking, "If you are dependent on God, how can you make a god who is dependent on you? If you were created by God, how can you create a god?" In other words, Paul is showing them the logical inconsistency of the basic presuppositions of their religion.

An example of a logical inconsistency today can be seen in New Age beliefs. As stated before, New Agers are pantheists. This idea includes the concept of God being an impersonal force like the wind or electricity. However, New Agers are also fond of quoting the Bible's statement, "God is love" (1John 4:8).

But it must be asked, "How can an impersonal force love?" I may love the wind but it cannot love me. And I have never felt loved by electricity. Think about it.

The gods of the Greeks were distant beings who had no concern for the problems and needs of men. But the God of Creation is also the God of history and geography! He created mankind “from one man” (**Acts 17:26, niv**) so that all nations are made of the same stuff and have the same blood.

The Greeks felt that they were a special race, different from other nations; but Paul affirmed otherwise. Even their precious land that they revered came as a gift from God. It is not the power of man, but the government of God, that determines the rise and fall of nations (**Dan. 4:35**).

God is not a distant deity; “He [is] not far from every one of us” (**Acts 17:27**). Therefore, men ought to seek God and come to know Him in truth. Here Paul quoted from the poet Epimenides: “For in Him we live, and move, and have our being.” Then he added a quotation from two poets, Aratus and Cleanthes, “For we are also His offspring.” Paul was not saying that all people on earth are the spiritual children of God, for sinners become God’s children only by

faith in Jesus Christ (**John 1:11-13**). Rather, he was affirming the “Fatherhood of God” in a *natural* sense, for man was created in the image of God (**Gen. 1:26**). In this sense, Adam was a “son of God” (**Luke 3:38**).

This led to Paul’s logical conclusion: God made us in His image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image! Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men and who acted like men. Paul not only showed the folly of temples and the temple rituals, but also the folly of all idolatry.

Acts 17:30,31:

"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

The last attribute Paul mentions is, God is Judge. Since He created us; since He is sovereign over us and since He is infinite and thus knows all that we do, He has the right and ability to judge us. And further, since He is self-existent we can not give Him anything to appease His wrath against our sins.

Also, it is at this point that Paul first alludes to Jesus. Jesus has not been mentioned previously since the Athenians needed to know who God is before they could grasp the significance of the Person and work of Christ. The same is true today. For instance, the statement "Jesus is God" would be greatly misunderstood by a New Ager.

Paul uses [Jesus' resurrection](#) as proof of life and judgment after death (Heb 9:27). Elsewhere, Paul indicates Jesus' resurrection also demonstrates God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as payment for our sins (Rom 4:25). It is through repentance and faith in Jesus' death and resurrection that one can find [forgiveness of sins](#) and reconciliation to the one, true God (Rom 3:21-26; 10:8-13).

Acts 17:32-34:

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

The three different reactions Paul received to his sermon are the same which always occur whenever the Gospel is preached. First, "some mocked" and completely rejected the message. Second, "others" were willing to hear more on the matter. They did not immediately reject the Gospel but weren't quite ready to believe either.

Third, "some men joined him and believed." And among these new believers was even one of the leaders of the Athenian religious world, "Dionysius the Areopagite!"

Furthermore, "The apostolic example of Paul should motivate us to prepare to share the evangel, the good news, with people today who are still searching for human meaning and order, still looking for an 'unknown god' in a confusing and complex world" (Enroth, p.viii; Col 4:2-6).