

Acts Chapter 17 Continued

Acts 17:17 "Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him."

“Synagogue” (see note on 13:5).

Dispute means he argued with them. Devout means religious. The synagogue was Jewish and these people Paul was disputing were the leaders of the Jews. They were students of the Old Testament, but did not believe Jesus was the promised Messiah. It seems this dispute was not occasional, but daily.

Verses 18-19: The economic and political importance of Athens had waned, yet it remained an intellectual center throughout the New Testament era. The leading schools of thought were the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies. Epicurus (300 B.C.), had taught that though gods exist they are not interested in human affairs.

Denying any future life, he regarded freedom from fear and pain; that is mental tranquility, as the highest goal in life. Not merely pleasure, but mental pleasure is to be the goal of life. Do that which brings tranquility. Zeno at about the same time taught in the Porch (Greek stoa), thus his followers became known as “Stoics.”

He was a pantheist and so had taught that men need to live in harmony with nature, practicing self-discipline and virtue. The Stoics would strive to deny the flesh, whereas the “Epicureans” would ignore it, seeking not to become its slave. Paul was regarded by these philosophers as a “babbling” (Greek spermologos, “seed picker”).

Like the birds that flutter around the marketplace picking up chance seeds, what significant thing could Paul have to say? Nevertheless, they permitted him to speak at the “Areopagus” (Mars’ Hill), where philosophical, moral, and religious matters were heard and evaluated.

Acts 17:18 "Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbling say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection."

Epicureans, and of the Stoicks”: Epicurean philosophy taught that the chief end of man was the avoidance of pain. Epicureans were materialists, they did not deny the existence of God, but they believed He did not become involved with the affairs of men.

When a person died, they believed his body and soul disintegrated. Stoic philosophy taught self-mastery, that the goal in life was to reach a place of indifference to pleasure or pain.

“Babbler”: Literally “seed picker” Some of the philosophers viewed Paul as an amateur philosopher, one who had no ideas of his own but only picked among prevailing philosophies and constructed one with no depth.

These philosophers of the Epicureans taught that through philosophy a person could find happiness. True pleasure, and not absolute truth, is what they taught. In Athens, this philosophy of materialism was strongly supported at this time. The Stoics taught pride, individual independence, and believed in fate, not faith.

You see, neither of these was even vaguely associated with God. In fact, they both remind me of secular humanism which is centered on self, and not God. You see, they did not know God or His Son Jesus, and they did not believe in life after death.

Acts 17:19 "And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, [is]?"

“Areopagus”: a court named for the hill on which it once met. Paul was not being formally tried; only being asked to defend his teaching.

This Areopagus seems to be a court named after their false god of war. These people, who were so possessed with having every bit of knowledge they could get, would want this new knowledge, as well. They were fascinated with the mind, not the spirit.

Acts 17:20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean."

These people analyzed everything they heard. They checked out all new things, just as people today are always looking for something new. You cannot analyze God. He must be accepted on faith, not fact. These people worshipped their own mind.

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

If they could not prove it, they did not believe it. They had faith in no one and nothing. They dealt only with their so-called facts.

Verses 22-23: Paul does not condemn the Greeks in his introduction, calling them “too superstitious.” The word (Greek deisidaimonesterous), could better be translated “religious.” Paul is seeking to establish rapport with his audience by commending them for their zeal in worshipping THE UNKNOWN GOD. Paul will declare this true God to them.

Acts 17:22 “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, [Ye] men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious."

“Too superstitious”: Literally “in fear of gods”.

Areopagus and Mars' hill is the same place. Superstitious here, means more religious than others. He does not say they are involved with God, just that they are religious. A person can be religious about anything. Any habit you have, you are religious about it.

“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD”: The Athenians were supernaturalists, they believed in supernatural powers that intervened in the course of natural laws. They at least acknowledged the existence of someone beyond their ability to understand who had made all things. Paul thus had the opportunity to introduce them to the Creator-God who could be known (Deut. 4:35; 1 Kings 8:43; 1 Chron. 28:9; Psalm 9:10; Jer. 9:24; 24:7; 31:34; John 17:3).

Acts 17:23 "For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you."

You see, these intelligent people knew that there had to be something, or someone, who started all of this. In science, you can go so far back, but science does not really know where it all began.

Paul says here, you really are worshipping God, but you are ignorantly worshipping you know not what. For them to be told they are ignorantly doing anything is quite a shock to them. They think themselves to be very intelligent.

Paul says to them, listen and I will tell you who this God is.

Verses 24-31: With the Jews, Paul could use the Old Testament as common ground. With the Athenians, however, he must begin with the general revelation that every man possesses. He proclaims the true “God” as Creator and therefore transcendent about His creation (verses 24-25). He proclaims that this true God is sovereignly involved in the affairs of “men” (verse 26).

In fact, the true God is near them, within the reach of those who “seek” Him (verses 27-28). Therefore “all” peoples must “repent” and turn to Him, because a resurrection and a judgment day are coming.

Acts 17:24 "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;"

“God that made the world”: This teaching flatly contradicted both the Epicureans, who believed matter was eternal and therefore had no creator, and the Stoics, who as pantheists believed God was part of everything and could not have created Himself.

Paul's teaching finds its support throughout Scripture (Gen. 1:1; Psalm 146:5-6; Isa. 40:28; 45:18; Jer. 10:12; 32:17; Jonah 1:9; Zech. 12:1; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11; 10:6).

Paul here, is starting out with very fundamental teaching. He touches first on something that they will agree with. They know that they have no idea who made heaven or earth, so they will go along with this much of Paul's message.

They know that they have never seen Him, so they would also believe that he dwelleth not in temples. We see here, that boldness of Paul, because on this very Mars' hill they have temples to false gods. The Parthenon is one of the well-known temples here.

Acts 17:25 "Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;"

Since God made the world, and everything, and everyone in it, He really doesn't need us, or the things we might do for Him. We need Him. In Him we live, and breathe, and have our being.

Acts 17:26 "And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;"

“One blood”: All men are equal in god's sight since all came from one man, Adam. This teaching was a blow to the national pride of the Greeks, who believed all non-Greeks were barbarians (see note on Rom. 1:14).

“Determined the times before appointed”: God sovereignly controls the rise and fall of nations and empires (Dan. 2:36-45; Luke 21:24).

“The bounds of their habitation”: God is responsible for establishing nations as to their racial identity and their specific geographical locations (Deut. 32:8), and determining the extent of their conquests (Isa. 10:12-15).

These proud people do not want to hear that all these people of the world that they look down on, were made from the same blood line as they were. God decided what color our skin would be and where we would live. Paul is showing that all people everywhere are sisters and brothers, and that we should all worship the one true God who gave us all life.

Acts 17:27 "That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:"

“Seek the Lord”: The Lord's objective for man in revealing Himself as the creator, ruler and controller of the world. Men have no excuse for not knowing about God because He has revealed Himself in man's conscience and in the physical world (see notes on Rom 1:19-20; 2:15).

God is with us all the time. He never moves away from us. We sometimes wander away from Him. If we seek Him, we will find Him. The heathens are stumbling through life looking for something (they know not what). They are really looking for God and do not realize it.

His handiwork is around every one of us. The flowers, trees, skies, and for that matter, everything shows His handiwork. Paul is saying to these people, reach out, He is right here with you.

Acts 17:28 "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring."

“In him we live and move, and have our being”: A quote from the Cretan poet Epimenides.

Paul says here, that God causes us to live. We Christians know that the very breath of life breathed into us at creation is our life He (God), put within us. These words Paul quoted had been written by one of their Greek poets.

Acts 17:29 "Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device."

“The offspring of God”: A quote from Aratus, who came from Paul’s home region of Cilicia.

“Not ... like unto gold, or silver”: If man is the offspring of God, as the Greek poet suggested, it is foolish to think that God could be nothing more than a man-made idol. Such reasoning points out the absurdity of idolatry (Isa. 44:9-20).

Paul is explaining here to them why it is wrong to worship a statue of gold, or silver, or any other engraved thing. These are creations of man. We must only worship Creator God. Paul is saying, if you are God's offspring, then you know these images are not God.

Acts 17:30 "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:"

“The times of this ignorance” (see note on Rom. 3:25).

Paul says that God overlooked their sin in the past, because it was done in ignorance. God now has revealed Himself to mankind, and man must repent of all those sins he has committed and come to the one true God. Since the knowledge of God has come, God will not look the other way any longer at sin. Man must repent, and start over again worshipping God.

Acts 17:31 "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by [that] man whom he hath ordained; [whereof] he hath given assurance unto all [men], in that he hath raised him from the dead."

“Man whom he hath ordained”: Jesus Christ (John 5:22-27).

“Justice of God”: The justice of God is the active extension of the holiness of God into matters of decision. It implies that God has the authority and ability to establish the standard for all relationships and that He will be consistent in relating to His obedient and disobedient creatures. The justice of God is both legislative and distributive.

When Abraham attempted to prevent the destruction of Sodom, he appealed to God’s justice: he knew the Judge of all the earth would do right (Gen. 18:25). So today, everyone can have confidence that God will deal with him justly, but the believer may additionally plead God’s mercy. (Gen. 3:14; Acts 17:31; Mark 10:18).

We see here, that Paul has led them to the place and time of decision. Do they go on worshipping their idols, or do they repent and start life anew with this God that Paul is telling them of? Paul tells of a day of judgment, when even these people of Athens will stand before this Judge of all the world.

Paul tells them that the one who will judge the world is the very same Jesus that rose from the grave. His rising from the grave is evidence of who He is. His judgment will be righteous.

Acts 17:32 “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this [matter].”

“Resurrection of the dead”: Greek philosophy did not believe in bodily resurrection.

Paul had turned some of them completely off when he mentioned the resurrection, because they did not believe in life after death. Some, however, were interested and were eager to hear more about this life after death. All men fear death, until they have the blessed hope of the resurrection.

Acts 17:33 "So Paul departed from among them."

Paul had done and said all that he could.

Acts 17:34 "Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which [was] Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them."

An “Areopagite” was a member of the Athenian high council (court).

In another book, other than the Bible, we read that a Dionysius was the pastor of a diocese in Corinth and this one here was named for him. This woman Damaris was not a relative of his. Perhaps, these specific mentions here just show how few received the gospel message into their hearts.

Acts Chapter 17 Continued Questions

1. Why was Paul whisked off to Athens?
2. Who did he leave behind?
3. What did Paul find out about Athens?
4. Who did Paul dispute with in the synagogue?
5. How often did Paul do this?
6. What philosophers encountered him?
7. They said he seemed to be a setter forth of what?
8. What did Paul preach to them?
9. How did they believe a person could find happiness?
10. What did the Stoics teach?
11. What, in our modern society, are they like?
12. Where did they take Paul when they took him?
13. What false god was it named for?
14. Why did they want to hear the new doctrine?
15. What did they spend their time doing?
16. What was another name for Mars' hill?
17. What did Paul say he perceived about them?
18. Paul had found an inscription on an altar to whom?
19. Who did Paul tell them this was?
20. Where did Paul tell them God did not dwell?
21. Where did Paul tell them He was Lord of?
22. In verse 25, Paul says that God gives all people what two things?
23. How does verse 26 teach against prejudice?

24. Who should seek the Lord?

25. "For in Him we _____ and _____"

26. Whose words had Paul quoted to them?

27. What should we know about the Godhead since we are his offspring?

28. What were all men now commanded to do?

29. Who will judge the world?

30. How will He judge?

31. When they heard what, some mocked?

32. Who specifically were mentioned who believed?