

Gospel Triumph: Gospel Confrontation – Acts 17:16-34

Does anyone know what the Dunning-Kruger Effect is? I first read about this a few years ago in a book called *The Death of Expertise*, which is a great book. The Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias where people with less knowledge in an area are more confident of their opinions in that particular area. The reverse is also true. The more real knowledge you gain in an area, the less confidence you have because you realize there's quite a bit you don't know.

So, let me give you an example. I, along with most of the population of the Detroit metro area, have never played football, even at a high school level, and I've certainly never coached football. I have read a blog pretty consistently over the years about Michigan football and I've been known to listen to sports radio and podcasts about football. All of this leads me, along with most of metro Detroit, to know exactly what Dan Campbell and the Lions coaching staff should be doing game in and game out.

You can see this effect at work in so many areas. Medicine, education, politics, nutrition, and even in humanity's knowledge of God. Now, I'm not saying Acts 17 is an example of the Dunning-Kruger Effect this morning, but I do think it describes the human propensity to live wrongly with confidence in how we understand God. What's amazing about this passage is how the people and philosophers of Athens sit in judgment on Paul's explanation of the Gospel. They automatically believe themselves to be in the place of deciding what is right and true. Even though they may not buy his explanation of God and criticism of idolatry, Paul shows that Christian belief in the one true God is always the standard because it is the truth.

Whenever the gospel enters a situation like this, it automatically confronts and dismantles unbelief and the foundations on which that unbelief is based. There's no clearer example of this in the NT than Paul's speech on the Areopagus in Athens. So, in Acts 17:16-34 we are going to see **3 Parts of the Gospel's Confrontation with Unbelief.**

1. The Pervasive Problem (vv. 16-21)

Look with me at the first phrase of verse 16. It's been a couple of weeks since we've been in Acts together, so how did Paul end up in Athens waiting, and who was he waiting for? Athens is one of those cities I'm sure you have heard of. It was a hallmark of ancient philosophy and political power. It produced such luminaries as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Of course, when Paul found himself waiting there it was under Roman rule but still had quite a tradition of philosophical discussion and the pursuit of wisdom.

Paul ended up in Athens after sneaking out of Thessalonica to Berea and then having the Jews from Thessalonica travel to Berea to run him out of that city as well. Look back to 17:13-15. Athens is quite a ways from Berea, which you can see from this map and Paul would not have known how long until Silas and Timothy made the trip to join him.

Because he's waiting for them, he doesn't immediately go into the synagogue and begin his normal practice of ministry. It appears he's sort of living in and assessing the city while he waits. But what he sees is deeply unsettling to him. Look at the rest of verse 16. This is describing his conscience being provoked and not the Holy Spirit, but it's the same reaction God has to idolatry throughout the OT.

This description resonates with me because of my trips to Nepal. It's a land where many gods are worshiped and idols are around every bend in the road. Here are a couple of pictures from my most recent trip. The Nepali man who we travel with and who translates for us is Anand. I've been staying at his house since 2011 on these trips and right across the street from his house is a little shrine to some Hindu god. People stop by the shrine to worship every morning and ring the bell after they have placed their offering of food before the idol and said a prayer. It's been going on every day for almost 15 years and long before I showed up.

They have shrines everywhere and statues of gods everywhere and when I'm there if I pause and think about for a second, it becomes almost overwhelming. People devote their lives to these idols and seek to please the gods they believe inhabit these idols by providing them food or money. They seek to honor them by giving them time and resources.

Athens is filled with physical idols, but of course, every human culture creates idols. Tim Keller defined an idol this way that goes far beyond a stone or wood statue. *“What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...” “A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”* – Tim Keller

We don't have physical statues set up to gods in our culture, but we certainly have come up with idols to worship that fit this definition. We pursue them to find meaning for our lives. You can probably list these: Money, sex, power, fame are the most common listed, but I think we can go far beyond those typical idols. It's quite normal to worship the god of comfort and a pain free life. Or to pursue the god of control or security. Pause to reflect on American culture for even a few seconds and you begin to see idols everywhere. You begin to see people devoted to ease and pleasure, to power and control, to making life work for me and getting what I want.

Paul's eyes are open to the pervasive problem of humanity. **We try to fill the void in our hearts by manufacturing gods of our own making and then worshiping those gods.** He's vexed by the emptiness and insanity of this and so he takes action. Look at verse 17. This is the same language we saw last time where Paul “reasons” with the Jews in Thessalonica and seeks to persuade them of the truth of Jesus. But this time his ministry bleeds out into the marketplace.

Now, make sure you understand the situation of the marketplace. This was the hub of life in Athens. People brought food and goods to sell and trade, but there were also discussions going on regarding philosophy and the gods. Athens had a long history of this, and the marketplace was where most of this action took place. Paul has now reached the point in his ministry where he intentionally engages Gentiles outside of the synagogue. He begins to get the attention of some of the major groups in the city. Look at verse 18.

Now, I don't know what you think of when you think of Epicureanism and Stoicism. Maybe nothing at all, but there are modern caricatures of these two

schools of thought that really miss the mark. Epicureans are often viewed as drunken party animals and Stoics as emotionless logic-based robots.

Epicureans were simply trying to understand the good life and trying to figure out how to get the most happiness out of life here and now. They believed that if any gods existed, they were disconnected from daily life and unconcerned for what humans did. Make the most of every day was the idea. Stoics were simply trying to deal with the universe and suffering as it came to them. They believed in fate, and you really couldn't do much to alter fate so you had to respond with virtue and acceptance.

Now, these two schools of philosophy and views of life are not cheap and ignorant ways of moving through life. These two traditions had been around for a long time in Athens, and they continue to have influence today. My doctoral supervisor is a New Testament scholar, but he loves philosophy and he said if there's one philosophical tradition that makes the most sense and is most helpful outside of the truth of Christianity, it's Stoicism. The book *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius is a classic work of Stoicism and many people today find it encouraging and helpful as a guide to live life well.

Neither of these groups thought highly of Paul initially, look at verse 18. But notice the heart of what Paul was telling them at the end of verse 18. The message is the same throughout Acts. The crux of the issue for Christians is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If this happened, everything else falls into place. If it didn't, well, listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 and then verse 32. I've always thought Paul's response if there's no resurrection sounds a little Epicurean in verses 19 and 32.

But Paul's teaching in the marketplace provides enough interest that they invite him to speak to a wider and more important audience. Look at verse 19-20.

There's some debate over exactly what this gathering at the Areopagus involved, but at a minimum it was a much more formal inquiry into Paul's teaching. Apparently, they thought Paul was introducing new gods into the pantheon and

they wanted to hear about them. They also were curious about this idea of the resurrection.

So, Paul goes with them and ends up giving one of his most famous speeches in Acts. But before he gets there, notice how Luke prepares us for Paul's speech with this editorial comment in verse 21. Luke has just recorded the belittling of Paul and his teaching in verse 18 and now he balances that out by pointing out the tendency of the Athenians. They were the ones who constantly moved from idea to idea and never fully settled on the truth. And it's the truth they were about to hear.

Now, before you get too nervous about time, understand that we are going to return to this text next week. I want to be able to dive into Paul's speech fully and explore the masterful way he argues for the Christian view of God and shows any other view to be lacking. But before we close, I want to make one more point.

Paul's concerns in Athens and then his speech here put the whole problem with humanity on the ground of worship. If you look back to verse 18, you will notice that in Athens Paul encounters a wide range of unbelief. From Jews to Gentiles in the marketplace to philosophers in two of the most revered traditions. What deeply unsettles him and what he attacks in his speech is the pervasive human problem of idolatry.

And really, at the end of the day, the root cause of idolatry is the tendency of humans to put themselves above God. Listen to Paul in Romans 1:21-25. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie. One author put it this way: *"Worshipping false gods or worshipping the true God falsely arose from the same mechanism - creatures inverting their rightful place relative to their Creator."* – Richard Lints

And because we have all bought into this lie, we need the truth of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the doorway to the truth, and it exposes the lie of false and idolatrous worship. Ground yourself in this. Let's pray.

2. The Prophetic Perspective (vv. 22-31)
3. The Particular Profit (vv. 32-34)