

Acts

Part 45 – “Proclaiming the Unknown God”

Acts 17:16-34

After being forced to leave Berea Paul travelled to Athens, probably in the Spring of AD 50. Paul's ministry in Athens (17:16-34) is the first report of the mission to Achaia. It will be followed by a trip to Corinth (18:1-22).

Athens was perhaps the most significant cultural center of the Roman Empire. It was known for its art, its philosophers, its architecture, and its intellectual erudition. As Paul familiarized himself with the city he took note of the abundance of idols and pagan temples. In fact, so great was the Athenian devotion to the gods that they had even constructed an altar to an “unknown god.” That altar became the entry point of Paul's apologetic to the gathered philosophers in the Areopagus.

It is noteworthy that Paul's approach to evangelism in the Areopagus differed from his approach in the synagogues.



In the later Paul could count on a common set of presuppositions concerning the nature of God and creation. Before the pagan philosophers, however, Paul had to begin his evangelism with the most elementary categories of a Christian worldview. He had to confront their pagan view of the cosmos. He had to establish monotheism and begin defining the nature of the God who is. He did this clearly but with respect. Paul does not appear to belittle the Athenians. In fact he even finds points of contact with them by referencing some of their own poets. However, he presents a series of truths which stood in diametric opposition to their own views.

Main Idea: The gospel is God's eternal and universal truth of salvation applicable to all people everywhere and therefore should be presented with confidence for the purpose of persuasion.

Exegetical Outline:

- I. The Mission in Athens (17:16-34)
 - A. Proclamation in the Synagogue and Market (vv. 16-17)
 - B. Discussion with the Athenian Philosophers (vs. 18)
 - C. Paul is taken to appear before the Areopagus (vv. 19-22c)
 - D. Paul's speech to the Areopagus council (vv. 22d-31)
 - E. The aftermath of Paul's speech (vv. 32-34)

Athens:

Athens had been a great political, military, intellectual, and artistic center for the Greek empire. It was the home of the philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Great architectural sites like the Parthenon and the temple of Athena. By the first century Athens' military and political glory were things of the past. However, the city remained a notable center of intellectual and artistic life.

Areopagus:

The Areopagus is rocky hill in Athens named after the Greek god of war Aries. It is also referred to as Mars Hill after the Roman god of war Mars. The Areopagus was also the name for the council that convened there to rule on religious and civic matters.

Epicureanism and Stoicism:

Stoicism and Epicureanism were two prominent Athenian schools of philosophy. **Stoicism** stressed reason and self-sufficiency, had a pantheistic view of God as a world-soul, and thus an emphasis on the unity of mankind. It preached individual moral duty with earnestness. **Epicureanism** saw pleasure as the chief end of life, but pleasure in a more serious form, tranquility being the chief of all pleasures. It has sometimes been linked with sensuality, but that was not the idea. Epicureans attacked superstitions and irrational religious faith. Epicureans were generally materialists, who believed either that the gods did not exist or, if they did, that they were far removed from the life of man on earth, too far to exercise an influence. In his speech Paul identified with both to a certain degree but then demonstrated the inherent flaws in both. Most significantly, neither Stoicism nor Epicureanism had any real hope of overcoming the sinfulness of man in a crumbling world or of salvation after death.

Success or Failure?

Paul's speech at the Areopagus has been a point of disagreement among various scholars. Some maintain that Paul's efforts were not evangelistic but merely a way to reduce concerns that he is a threat to the civil order. Others believe that Paul saw his time in Athens as a failure which he acknowledged in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians where he disavows "wisdom" and determines to "know nothing but Christ and him crucified" (2:2). However, this argument is unconvincing. While Paul's approach at the Areopagus was clearly different from his approach in the synagogues, such a difference is to be expected given the profound differences in the audiences. It is also clear that Paul is indeed being intentionally evangelistic by confronting Athenian idolatry, pointing to Jesus and his resurrection, and the call to repent before the coming judgment.

The Components of Paul's Evangelism:

1. God

2. Mankind

3. Christ

4. Response