

**17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.**

**17:17 So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.**

**17:18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"-- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.**

**17:19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?"**

**17:20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean."**

**17:21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)**

"Areopagus" (verse 17) is a Greek word composed of *pagos* (hill) and *Ares* (the god of war); thus, it is the Hill of Ares; the same place was called Mars Hill in Latin. The Areopagus could refer either to a locale, a rocky height to the west of the Acropolis in Athens, or the name of the highest court which in ancient times used to meet there. In Paul's day, the Areopagus (council) was a less authoritative council that consisted of the guardians of the city's religion, morals, and education. And it doesn't appear as if Paul was on trial. There is no mention of a legal charge, no prosecutor, no judge, no verdict, and no sentence. Rather, Paul appears to be at an informal inquiry by the city's commission determining if he was introducing foreign gods into the city. In other words, the reason Paul was standing before them was because they said he was "bringing some strange things" to their ears and they wanted to know what he was actually saying. But they were also novelty-seekers; they "used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new." The outcome of the inquiry would result in either permission granted to Paul to continue teaching, or a demand that he be silent. Therefore, Paul told the court what he believed and presented the gospel.

**17:22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.**

**17:23 "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.**

Paul began by commending the Athenians for being very religious. He then used an altar dedicated with an inscription to an unknown God as a segue to talk about the one true God. Paul wasn't endorsing their idolatrous system, nor was he suggesting that the idol represented God; rather, he was focusing their attention on their own acknowledgment of their ignorance and was using this as a transition to explain who God is.

Paul proclaims four truths about God that speak directly to the Epicureans and the Stoics.

**1. God is the creator of the universe.**

***17:24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;***

Those to whom Paul was addressing had two very different perspectives of reality. The Epicureans believed that the gods had no concern for humans and the world was due to chance, while the Stoics believed in a type of pantheism. Paul refutes both philosophies. He first says that God exists; He is the Creator of everything (Isa. 42:5; Exo. 20:11). He is "The God who made the world and all things in it."

- Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
- Psalm 33:6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And by the breath of His mouth all their host.
- John 1:3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.
- Colossians 1:16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created through Him and for Him.
- Revelation 4:11 ". . . You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."
- Acts 4:24 O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM,

Although God is present everywhere, He is distinct from all things. This is clear in Paul's statement, "God who made the world and all things in it." If He made the world, He is not the world. Pantheism (which the Stoics believed in) is the belief that God is all that exists. Pantheism asserts that God minus the world equals nothing; theism asserts that God minus the world equals God. The universe is the creation of God, not part of Him. Consequently, although all things are permeated and sustained by God (Colossians. 1:16-17; Acts 17:28), God is not all things.

As Creator of all things, He has the right to rule all things because he is the Owner of all things. If God is "Lord of heaven and earth," He is not distant as the Epicureans believed. This is also clear in the following verses.

**2. God is the sustainer of life.**

***17:25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;***

God not only made the world and all things in it, He is the one who sustains the world. He Himself gives all people life and breath and all things. If He is the Sustainer, He doesn't need anything from us to sustain Him. We depend on God; He doesn't depend on us.

In relationship to God there is no category for ownership, only stewardship; He owns everything. I own nothing. I simply use and take care of what is His. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive?" The answer is NOTHING!

"As the world order is not self-created, so it is not self-sustaining, as God is. The stability of the universe depends on constant divine upholding; this is a specific ministry of the divine Son (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), and without it every creature of every kind, ourselves included, would cease to be" (Packer, Concise Theology: A Guide To Historic Christian Beliefs; God is the Creator).

### **3. God is the ruler of all the nations/ the father of all humanity.**

**17:26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times (i. e., the turning points in history) and the boundaries of their habitation,**

**17:27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;**

**17:28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'**

**17:29 "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.**

Verses 25 to 28 describe a doctrine that we call providence. The providence of God is the doctrine of God's involvement in the world and in the daily affairs of our lives.

Wayne Grudem says the following:

Once we understand that God is the all-powerful Creator, it seems reasonable to conclude that he also preserves and governs everything in the universe as well. Though the term providence is not found in Scripture, it has been traditionally used to summarize God's ongoing relationship to his creation. When we accept the biblical doctrine of providence, we avoid four common errors in thinking about God's relationship to creation. The biblical doctrine is not deism (which teaches that God created the world and then essentially abandoned it), nor pantheism (which teaches that the creation does not have a real, distinct existence in itself, but is only part of God), but providence which teaches that though God is actively related to and involved in the creation at each moment, creation is distinct from him. Moreover, the biblical doctrine does not teach that events in creation are determined by chance (or randomness), nor are they determined by impersonal fate (or determinism), but by God, who is the personal yet infinitely powerful Creator and Lord.

We may define God's providence as follows: God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.

In these verses, two of the three elements of providence (see above definition) are mentioned: preservation (He sustains His creation) and government (He directs His creation to fulfill His purposes). These verses also demonstrate that God is not absent- He is immanent; that is, is closely involved in His creation- He is near to it. Paul says, "He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things" (17:25) and "in Him we live and move and exist" (17:28).

These same truths are found elsewhere in Scripture.

God's preservation is seen in:

- Job 12:10 In whose hand is the life of every living thing, And the breath of all mankind?
- Nehemiah 9:6 You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You."
- Ephesians 4:6 (God) is over all and through all and in all.
- Colossians 1:17 in Him (Christ) all things hold together.
- Hebrews 1:3 (Christ) upholds all things by the word of His power.

Jesus spoke of God's care over His creation in Matthew 5:45. He said, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." He also demonstrates God's involvement with His creation when He said in Matthew 10:29-30, "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Psalm 104:4 says, "He makes the winds His messengers, flaming fire His ministers." "He covers His hands with the lightning, and commands it to strike the mark" (Job 36:32).

The Scriptures teach that irrational animals are the objects of God's providential care. He fashions their bodies, He calls them into the world, sustains them in being, and supplies their wants. In his hand is the life of every living thing. (Job 12:10.) The Psalmist says (104:21), "The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God." Verses 27, 28, "They all wait for You To give them their food in due season. You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good." Matthew 7:26, "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." Acts 17:25, "He gives to all life and breath, and all things." Such representations are not to be explained away as poetical modes of expressing the idea that the laws of nature, as ordained of God, are so arranged as to meet the necessities of the animal creation, without any special intervention of his providence. It is not the fact, merely, that the world, as created by God, is adapted to meet the wants of his creatures, that is asserted in the Scriptures, but that his creatures depend on the constant exercise of his care. He gives or withholds what they need according to his good pleasure. When our Lord put in the lips of his disciples the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread," He recognized the fact that all living creatures depend on the constant intervention of God for the supply of their daily wants (edited - Hodge).

Paul also refers to God as directing His creation to fulfill His purposes: he says that God determined the appointed times of the nations (i.e., the turning points in history) and the boundaries of their habitation. This also demonstrates His personal involvement in the affairs of men.

The Bible teaches that the providential government of God extends over nations and communities of men. Ps. 66:7, "He rules by His might forever; His eyes keep watch on the nations; let not the rebellious exalt themselves." Dan. 4:35, "He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth." Dan. 2:21, "He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings." Dan. 4:25, "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes." Isa. 10:5, 6, " Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hands is My indignation, I send it against a godless nation." Verse 7, "Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it? Is the saw to exalt itself over the one who wields it? That would be like a club wielding those who lift it, Or like a rod lifting him who is not wood." The Scriptures are full of this doctrine. God uses the nations with the absolute control that a man uses a rod or a staff. They are in his hands, and He employs them to accomplish his purposes. He breaks them in pieces as a potter's vessel, or He exalts them to greatness, according to his good pleasure (edited, Hodge)

The providence of God extends not only over nations, but also over individuals. The circumstances of every man's birth, life, and death, are ordered by God. Whether we are born in a heathen or in a Christian land, in the Church or out of it; whether weak or strong; with many, or with few talents; whether we are prosperous or afflicted; whether we live a longer or a shorter time, are not matters determined by chance, or by the unintelligent sequence of events, but by the will of God. 1 Sam. 2:6, 7, "The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts." Isa. 45:5, "I am the LORD (the absolute ruler), and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me;" Prov. 16:9, "The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps." Ps. 31:15, "My times (the vicissitudes of life) are in Your hand." (edited, Hodge)

According to Paul, God's purpose in revealing Himself to the nations as He has is so that human beings who have been made in His image might seek Him and reach out for Him. But they do not. Instead, man can only grope for God. The wording Paul uses is the fumbling of a blind man in darkness. Though men grope for God, the hope of finding Him will remain unfulfilled because of human sin, as the rest of Scripture makes clear. God's inability to be found by men is not the fault of God, for God is not far from each of us (Acts 17:27b); the problem is with us; we are far from Him.

Romans 1:18-23 says that though God has revealed Himself, men suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Though men "knew God, *they did not honor Him as God or give thanks*, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."

Additional observations:

1) We owe God everything. God alone is worthy of worship. In Isaiah 42:8 God said, "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images." This is not egotism; rather, it reflects the truth that we should only honor what deserves to be honored. We should only worship what is worthy of worship. If we were to ask God, "What deserves to be honored and worshipped?" the answer would be, "Only God." That isn't egotistical; it's truth.

2) When Paul says that all men are God's offspring, he is not saying that all will be saved; rather, they are His offspring by creation.

3) Everything in creation is under the providing care of God. Not only does God supply all things, He arranges them according to His plan for His glory. "Twenty-first century sensibilities dismiss the idea of an overruling God in preference to self-direction. Healthy, wealthy, intelligent, capable humans take responsibility and control of their own future through education, insurance, prudent financial investment, savvy work choices and the occasional international holiday. Christianity seems to have outgrown providence" (Earnshaw). Yet for Christians:

1. Understanding Providence gives us deep gratitude to God for all good things--including our love for Him and faith in Him--because all good things are from God (see Romans 11:36 and James 1:18).

2. It should also create a godly fear and reverence of God in our hearts--for He is in control and we are not. He is the One on the throne before which we must bow.

3. Not only that, it also brings great joy to know that God is so concerned with His creation and that in His wisdom He is ruling all things for His greatest glory and His people's greatest good.

4. Knowledge of Providence can keep us from despair, and instead give us patience and comfort, strength and hope through suffering and adversity because we know that all pain has a purpose.

5. If we believe in Providence, we can marvel at God's great wisdom because He works all things together for His glory and His people's good (Romans 8:28).

6. Far from Providence being a discouraging doctrine, it frees us to obey with confidence and security--even when obedience appears risky or "foolish" by the world's standards. Knowing that God is in control encourages us into risk-taking obedience for God's great glory. In all things, we can have great courage and boldness.

7. Understanding Providence is also very important for humility. Daniel 4:35 is a key verse on God's control over all things: "All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (1-7 by Matt Perman)

Verse 29 brings the conclusion and points out the absurdity of idolatry. If we are the offspring of God, then God cannot be an image formed by the art and thought of man, nor could His nature be that of gold or silver or stone.

*Paul has given powerful arguments against idolatry:*

- If God made the heavens and the earth, He cannot be confined to a specific locale.
- If He is the Sustainer of life, He doesn't need us; we need Him.
- If He is the ruler of the nations and determines their boundaries, He is close to man.
- If we are God's children, then God's nature could not be like gold, silver, or stone, nor could He be an image that is formed by us.

"There is no logic in idolatry; it is a perverse, topsy-turvy expression of our human rebellion against God. It leads to Paul's last point" (Stott, 287).

#### **4. God is the judge of the world.**

***17:30 "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent,***

***17:31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."***

In verses 30 and 31 Paul reverts back to addressing the topic of ignorance once more. The Athenians acknowledged in an inscription on an altar that they were ignorant of God. Paul had been giving them evidence of their ignorance. God has never left Himself without testimony. On the contrary, He has revealed Himself to the nations. However, as Paul states in Romans 1:18, the unbeliever suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. In the past God overlooked this ignorance. (Of course, Paul does not mean that God did not notice it, or that He excused it. Rather, he means that in His mercy He did not visit immediate judgment upon those who deserved it.) But now He commands people everywhere to repent. This is because time is running out; He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world.

Verse 31 tells us a number of things about God's judgment. 1) It is universal and includes all people everywhere. 2) It will be righteous; "He will judge the world in righteousness." 3) The judge has already been appointed and proof of who this man is has been given by raising Him from the dead (the resurrection of Jesus Christ not only vindicated Him; it declared Him to be both Lord and judge).

Paul's message was very apropos for the listeners. "Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man. What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough" (Marshall, 298).

**17:32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."**

**17:33 So Paul went out of their midst.**

**17:34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.**

Stott concludes:

The Areopagus address reveals the comprehensiveness of Paul's message. He proclaimed God in His fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father and Judge. He took in the whole of nature and of history. He passed the whole of time in review, from the creation to the consummation. He emphasized the greatness of God, not only as the beginning and the end of all things, but as the one to whom we owe our being and to whom we must give account. He argued that human beings already know these things by natural or general revelation, and that their ignorance and idolatry are therefore inexcusable. So he called on them with great solemnity, before it was too late, to repent.

Now all this is part of the Gospel. Or at least it is the indispensable background to the Gospel, without which the gospel cannot effectively be preached. Many people are rejecting our gospel today not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. People are looking for an integrated world-view which makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment. Today's world needs a bigger gospel, the full Gospel of Scripture, what Paul later in Ephesus was to call 'the whole purpose of God' (Acts 20:27).

It is not only the comprehensiveness of Paul's message in Athens which is impressive, however, but also the depth and the power of his motivation. Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt. We have never had the paroxysm of indignation which he had. Divine jealousy has not stirred within us. We constantly pray "Hallowed be your Name", but we do not seem to mean it, or to care that His name is so widely profaned.

Why is this? It takes us a stage further back. If we do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul, this is because we do not see like Paul. That was the order: he saw, he felt, he spoke. It all began with his eyes. When Paul walked around Athens, he did not just "notice" the idols. The Greek verb used three times (16, 22, 23) is either *theoreo* or *anatheoreo* and means to 'observe' or 'consider'. So he looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled within him. For he saw men and women, created by God in the image of God, giving to idols the homage which was due to Him alone.

Idols are not limited to primitive societies; there are many sophisticated idols, too. An idol is a God-substitute. Any person or thing that occupies the place which God should occupy is an idol. Covetousness is idolatry. Ideologies can be idolatries. So can fame, wealth and power, sex, food, alcohol and other drugs, parents, spouses, children and friends, work, recreation, television and possessions, even church, religion and Christian service. Idols always seem particularly dominant in cities. Jesus wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem. Paul was deeply pained by the idolatrous city of Athens. Have we ever been provoked by the idolatrous cities of the contemporary world? (Stott, 290-291).