

## **A Pastor's Look at Paul in Athens**

**By: Kirk M. Wellum**

In this paper I want to explore what Luke tells us about the apostle Paul's visit to Athens as recorded in Acts 17:16-34. My interest in doing so is not merely academic but pastoral and practical. I believe that Acts 17:16-34 has some important things to say to us in the day and place in which we live because it gives us a rare NT glimpse of an apostle presenting the gospel in a secular setting that in many respects mirrors the situation in which we increasingly find ourselves today in Ontario. While most evangelistic snapshots in the book of Acts involve the communication of the gospel to Jews, or at least those familiar with Judaism, Paul's visit to Athens gives us some idea how the great apostle and evangelist to the Gentiles engaged the secular thinkers of his time.

For some time now various Christians have spoken of our culture as a "post-Christian" culture. By this they mean that there is no longer a shared set of Christian values and assumptions that we can appeal to when we preach Christ. Recently, one of my brothers forwarded me an e-mail message from the office of Brian Stiller, the President of Tyndale College and Seminary in Toronto, which illustrates the "post-Christian" situation in which we find ourselves today. The e-mail contained excerpts from a report written by Matthew Greco on some recent polling done by the Gallup Organization. It is dated February 28, 2002 and entitled, "Revival in America? Religious revival on its way..." It reads as follows:

"The good news is that Americans are feeling more religious and spiritual. The bad news is they're not sure who gave the Sermon on the Mount..."

Interest in religion and spirituality in America has not diminished--in fact, just the opposite, Gallup said. In the last decade, the number of Americans who believe in heaven and hell is up from 6 in 10 to 8 in 10.

Indeed, this concern about going from the seen to the unseen world presents the church with an incredible challenge, said Gallup, speaking to an interdenominational audience at Manhattan's St. Ignatius Church. "It is a moment to be seized by the faith community."

Part of the challenge is that people say they believe in God, but they're not sure what they believe. "Americans are hard pressed to say why they're Christians. They don't know what they believe or why," he observed.

Americans have a high level of credulity and believe in everything from the devil to haunted houses, extraterrestrials and witches. Many hold traditional and non-traditional beliefs simultaneously as they create "a la carte" homemade religions, Gallup said.

Some 54% of Americans say they're religious, while 30% say they're spiritual and not religious. These percentages are about the same for teenagers.

But what's worrisome in Episcopal congregations is the neglect of youth programs. "We're very remiss at engaging youth," he said. As with other mainline traditions, the Episcopal Church has been losing membership for the last 30 years, a trend Gallup blamed on the lack of youth programs--and the fact that Episcopalians "don't believe" in evangelism.

Gallup noted that some people think that American religion is 3000 miles wide and three inches deep. "There's much to that. Religion is not primary, not at the centre. Americans are stuck in between disbelief and the security of knowing God."

All of this is not true of African-Americans, who are probably the most religious people of any group in the world. "You'd be hard pressed to find even one African American who doesn't

believe in a personal God," he said. It is the power of that bedrock faith that will lead the coming spiritual renewal, he said.

While there is a concern over the lack of depth in American religious belief, contrary to expectations, church attendance stays high among those with higher education, an anomaly of American society not true in other countries.

Reflecting on the post-September 11 religious climate, Gallup noted the well-documented initial rush to churches and the tremendous increase in Bible sales. However, three weeks later, church attendance was back down to normal as well as what people said was the importance of religion in their lives. Curiously, people continued to say that the impact on society of religion is up enormously, a perception not matched by their own reality.

Still, Gallup said, "My guess is in the long run these experiences will intensify the spiritual search going on now."

Even if we cannot buy everything that is said, careful reflection on these poll results should cause us to stop and evaluate to what degree we are addressing the biblical illiteracy and confusion that surrounds us. Personally, I believe that many of us, myself included, are better at presenting the gospel to "Jews and God-fearers" than we are at reaching the kind of people Paul found in the Athenian Agora and Areopagus. Yet the reality of the current situation is that these latter groups make up the majority of people who live around us whether we live in small rural towns or a major metropolitan areas. Western church growth enthusiasts often think they understand this phenomenon and see themselves as moving to address it, but I for one, find that their solutions are frequently too cosmetic and often demonstrate a deep failure to grasp the more fundamental issues that need to be addressed.

This is where I think Dr. Luke and the apostle Paul can help us. In Acts 17, Luke writes and Paul speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Together they show us what it takes to minister in a setting where people are unfamiliar with the basic tenants of the faith. It would be a mistake to try and turn these verses into some kind of one, two, three formula which if followed to the letter would guarantee success. Rather our aim should be to understand the general principles being articulated so that with the Spirit's help we might put them into practice in our own specialized circumstances.

### **1. There Is No Time like the Present to Share the Truth**

Luke begins his documentation of Paul's visit to Athens by telling us that it took place "by accident." Paul's arrival in Athens does not seem to have been part of his original missionary plan. After receiving the call to come to Macedonia (Ac.16:9), Paul most likely intended to make his way overland to the Adriatic Sea and from there to Italy and onto Rome. But this is not what God had in mind and so Paul ended up in Athens, after Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and agitated the crowds to such a degree that it was no longer safe for him to stay in the city. Paul was sent to the coast and then escorted to Athens where he was forced to wait until Silas and Timothy were able to rendezvous with him. It was while Paul was "*waiting for them in Athens...*" that a series of events unfolded which culminated in his appearing before the Areopagus.

We must always be ready to engage the culture in which we live. I am not saying that we can never take some time off; we must, or we will eventually come apart. But if we are going to speak to those outside the normal confines of the church we must be open to God's providential leading in our lives. Such divine appointments will not necessarily present themselves to us at a set time and in a specific place. More often than not they will come our way as we go about our lives and ministry, as we get involved in the education of our children, workout at the gym,

travel across the city or the country, sit in a doctor's office or visit someone in the hospital. While recognizing the unique itinerant ministry of the apostle Paul we must not excuse ourselves or hide possible laziness or even downright cowardice behind the very proper veneer of ministerial duty and routine that only sees us share the gospel at Sunday services or in Bible study groups. As Peter has exhorted us: "*In our hearts we should set apart Christ as Lord and always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give a reason for the hope that we have*" (1 Pet.3:15). Personally, I will never forget riding with Erroll Hulse in a taxi cab in Toronto and watching him share Jesus Christ with two cabbies who got more than they bargained for when they stopped to pick us up at the curb. Both taxi rides to and from Union Station took only a matter of minutes and yet in that short time he showed me what it was to make the most of every opportunity as he graciously talked about Jesus.

## **2. The Need To Heighten Our Spiritual Awareness And Sharpen Our Powers Of Observation**

Just because Paul had some time to kill in Athens did not mean that he sat around doing nothing, or even worse, that he got himself into trouble when no one else was around. Paul took advantage of the unplanned downtime in Athens to see the sights of the famous city. Although Athens was not what it was in its glory days under Pericles (495-429 B.C.), it still enjoyed considerable status and prestige in Paul's day. This ancient city, founded by Theseus, and named in honour of the goddess Athena, was home to such renowned figures as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno. The Romans conquered Athens in 146 B.C. but allowed it to function as a free city-state within the Roman Empire. As such Athens had a democratic form of government and was regarded as the intellectual and cultural centre of the world. First century Athens had a relatively small population of about 10,000 people but it was famous for its grand buildings like the Parthenon, which was dedicated to Athena, and its many temples, shrines, statues and altars. There were statues and images of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana and Aesculapius among many others. These were genuine works of art, skilfully crafted from materials like gold, silver, ivory and marble. It has been said that the gleaming spear-point on the gigantic gold and ivory statue of Athena housed in the Parthenon was visible forty miles away. This gives us some idea of the glory of Athens and helps us see what Paul saw as he made his way around the city. Whether he walked up to the acropolis, the city's ancient citadel, or to the agora (marketplace), with its numerous porticoes painted by artists, Athens was a sight to behold; an ancient city full of wonders.

Whatever Paul may have thought about the architectural beauty and storied antiquity of the city we are not told. But what Luke does tell us is that, "*While Paul was waiting in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols*" (v.16). The Greek word translated "greatly distressed" (*paroxyno*) is regularly used in the LXX to refer to God's reaction to the idolatry of Israel (cf. Dt.9:7, 18, 22; Ps.106:28-29; Is.65:2-3; Hos.8:5). Paul was irritated, provoked and even roused to anger by what he saw. For all its beauty and lore, the city was "full of idols," literally "swamped with idols." This sight grieved the apostle. It was a burden to him because he knew that this was not right. Men were made to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Although the citizens of Athens deemed themselves wise, they had become fools and were worshipping created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised (Rom.1:25). But what makes Paul different from other visitors to the city is that he could not shake this deep sense of futility. It burned in his mind and heart and moved him to action even though he could have just silently moaned and agonized within himself and gone on his way without doing anything.

If we are going to be effective servants in the Lord's hand to make a difference in our neighbourhoods, we need to look and listen as Paul did. For all the sophistication of our technologically advanced society, multitudes of people are living and dying without the Lord. We need to see this and feel this far more than we do. Without becoming morbid we must learn to see beyond the glitz and glamour and understand that our culture is also swamped with idols. Over time it is easy to blend into the surrounding culture. We get used to life here in Ontario and forget that we are strangers and pilgrims here who are looking for a new and better place to live. Our effectiveness will be greatly enhanced as we learn to look at life in light of God's word. Paul loved the Lord and the lost too much to keep silent. He looked at Athens as one who knew better – instead of being seduced and swallowed up by the wonder of it all like some naïve, impressionable tourist.

### **3. When Different Strokes for Different Folks Is the Way to Go**

Verses 17 and 18 tell us, *“and so he (Paul) reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, ‘What is this babbler trying to say?’ Others remarked, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’ They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.”*

What Luke describes here in Acts is an excellent example of Paul's philosophy of ministry that he outlines for us in more detail in 1 Cor.9:19-23:

*“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law though I myself am not under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”*

While the essential message did not change, Paul recognized the need to adapt his presentation of the gospel based on the assumptions and understanding of his audience. Not only did he actually go to the physical locations where people gathered, as opposed to waiting for them to come to him; but he cared about the people he was trying to reach so much so that he did everything he could to make them understand what he was saying. When Paul spoke to Jews and God-fearing Greeks, he would go to their places of worship and expound the OT Scriptures and assert and prove from them that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah of God. We have many examples of this pattern in Acts including Acts 13:13f; 17:10f. Paul could proceed in this way because both he and the people to whom he was speaking shared a common worldview. They shared a basic understanding of God, creation, sin, Messiah, salvation, and judgment. But when Paul spoke in the Agora to anyone who would listen, or to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus, he had to vary his approach because they did not share his worldview and therefore could not grasp what he was saying. Those outside the synagogue, the people of the Agora and Areopagus, were philosophically pluralistic in their thinking. That is, they did not believe in any ultimate truth beyond the ultimate truth that there is no ultimate truth! They could also be characterized as biblically illiterate, in that they did not know the main storyline, nor the primary characters of the Bible. In short, they did not have the necessary biblical background to understand the meaning and the exclusivity of the gospel, much like many people in the province of Ontario today!

We get a glimpse of the kind of philosophical and theological confusion that reigned in Athens by looking at the Epicureans and Stoics. The Epicureans were naturalists who took their name from Epicurus (342-270 B.C.); a thinker who taught that pleasure was the chief objective to be sought after in life. By pleasure he did not merely have in mind hedonistic sensual pleasures but what he considered the greatest pleasure: that of a tranquil life free from pain, disturbing passions and superstitious fears. Theologically, the Epicureans allowed for the possibility of gods, but if there were divine beings they were far removed from events here on earth and exercised no influence over the world. The world came about by the chance random configuration of atoms. There was no life-after-death and certainly no judgment. It was a matter of eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. It was the ancient equivalent of the modern beer commercial telling us that, "It doesn't get any better than this!"

The Stoics were founded by Zeno (340-265 B.C.) and derived their name from the painted Stoa, or colonnade, in the agora where Zeno taught his pupils. Their goal was to live in harmony with nature, they emphasized the use of reason and believed in human self-sufficiency. They were theological pantheists; God was all-pervasive, a kind of cosmic "world-soul." They viewed history as cyclical and fatalistic. They taught that our primary responsibility as human beings is to do our duty and in that way make the most of our lives. Stoics would make good employees and soldiers and citizens, but their basic assumptions were far removed from the truth of God revealed in the Scriptures.

In our day we must understand who we are speaking to and know how they are hearing us. If we really want to communicate with them we must not only know the truth ourselves but we must know how to address their particular distortions of the truth. In Roman 1, Paul says that the problem with sinful human beings is not lack of intellectual capacity, or even insufficient evidence, but suppression of the truth that has been revealed (1:18-19). Because we know this in advance we must creatively and yet truthfully poke and prod the minds, hearts and consciences of unbelievers so as to leave them without excuse. We must take into consideration where people are coming from and distinguish between those who know the main features of the biblical record and those who do not.

#### **4. Finding a Point Of Contact**

Whatever Paul said in the marketplace caused a stir. Not only did a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin to dispute with him but some made fun of him and called him demeaning names. The Greek word translated "babbling" is *spermologos* and originally referred to birds picking up scraps alongside the road. Over time it came to describe those who stole the ideas of others and mixed them together and presented them as their own. Others thought that Paul was advocating foreign gods because he was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection (anastasis). They may have thought of Jesus as some sort of male deity and Anastasis as his female counterpart.

In Athens there were a group of officials known as the Areopagus, or Council of Ares, named after the Greek god of war. This group met on the Hill of Ares which in Latin is Mars Hill and was located northwest of the Acropolis. When Athens was at the height of its political and economic power this body was very influential. By Paul's day they still retained some authority but that was mostly in religious and educational matters. They brought Paul before them, probably not to prosecute him, but to determine if he would be allowed to continue teaching in the city. As an interesting aside, Luke tells us that all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there loved to sit around and talk about and listen to the latest ideas. Paul was a novelty. They

had never heard anyone like him before and they wanted to know more, at least in an academic, intellectual sense.

Paul was more than happy to oblige them and when he stood to address the meeting of the Areopagus he did not waste any time getting down to business. *“Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To An Unknown God. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”* This is far more than an example of polite politics. Paul is establishing a point of contact with his audience. On this occasion he does not start with some event from Jewish history or with a quotation from the OT Scriptures, as he might have done in a synagogue, nor does he start with God’s general blessings and providential care of his creatures as he did in Lystra (Acts 14:8 -18). Instead he began where his audience was actually sitting and living with something that immediately drew them into what he was saying. He let them know that he had taken an interest in their city and their culture. He had looked carefully at their objects of worship. But his close inspection had revealed a problem; they were culpably ignorant of the true and living God. By starting in this way Paul is not justifying their position. Nor is he saying that he and they worship the same God only they do not fully know and understand who he is. He is making contact with them, beginning where they live, in order to call them to repentance and to a living knowledge of the God who has revealed himself definitively in Jesus Christ. It is important to see that Paul is not merely staking out some common ground. It is more accurate to say that he is boldly setting two worldviews in opposition to one another. One is right and the other is wrong. More to the point: his is right and theirs is wrong. And then he proceeds to tell them why. He will dispel their ignorance by means of special revelation. What they worship as something unknown he will proclaim to them! We must do the same. We need to carefully inspect the objects of worship in our own society in order to understand where people are prostrating themselves so that we might lead them by God’s grace to the throne of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The danger lies in not becoming so enamoured with what is going on around us that we never get to what is truly important. By all means watch the television carefully, be aware of what is drawing people to the box office, read the newspaper and magazines, engage people in conversation as you go about your daily routine, but remember that when all is said and done we must know how to get from where we make contact with them to Jesus.

##### **5. The Development and Presentation of a Comprehensive Worldview**

Finally we get to the heart of Luke’s presentation. We need to remember that what has been written and preserved for us has been greatly abbreviated and condensed. It only takes about a minute to read Paul’s entire address. Without a doubt he spoke much longer than this, maybe even in excess of an hour, so what we have here is just an outline of his remarks on that special occasion. In some ways this makes the passage all the more remarkable because in relatively few words we are given a powerful and yet brilliant example of how to present the gospel to a secular crowd, some of whom were apathetic while others were downright hostile to Paul’s presence and message.

Paul begins with God, who he is and what he is like and as he does he skilfully weaves throughout what the Scriptures say about man, who he is and how he is responsible to God. Then finally, at the very end of his address, he gets to Jesus Christ and the gospel bound up with his resurrection from the dead. *“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and*

*everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each of us.' For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (vs.24-31).*

### **God As Creator**

Paul starts with God as the Creator of the universe and man as the work of his hands (v. 24). God made the world and everything in it. This flies in the face of Greek intellectual thought. The world is not the result of the random configuration of atoms. Things did not appear by chance. The world and everything in it was created by a God who is both sovereign and personal. God is not just a vague concept. He is not mixed and mingled with his creation, a cosmic sort of world-soul. He is the Creator and everything is his creation including human beings who are accountable to him. Today too many people have no proper understanding of who God is. Like the ancient Athenians they tend to think of him as merely a larger, stronger and hopefully wiser version of themselves. But this is inadequate and distortion at this point leads to a failure to grasp the greatness of God and the depth of the human predicament. The Creator is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. He is "the Lion" who cannot be tamed. He is transcendent and all glorious and any attempt to bring him down to our own level is just plain foolish and wrong.

### **God As Sustainer**

Paul moves on to speak about God as the sustainer of life and man as being absolutely dependent upon him (v. 25). God is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Although it may come as a shock to many moderns, God does not need us to be complete and fulfilled or even to get the job done. The truth of the matter is that we need God. We need him every second of every day. We need him far more than we know. Paul tells us that God himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. God is self-sufficient and independent. We as human beings are absolutely dependent on him for everything. God is not distant and removed from our world and our lives; he is actively involved in everything that goes on even down to the minutest level. This kind of God cannot be bribed or manipulated or cajoled into action. He is not dependent on us for knowledge, direction or fellowship. The gods of ancient Athens were incapable of sustaining all of life. Unfortunately, the gods that are commonly worshipped today are much the same. And even more tragic is the pathetically silly attempt of so-called Open Theism to reconstitute and repackage the God of the Bible so that he has more in common with the theologies of the Areopagus than he does the special revelation made known to the apostle Paul. Until men and women see how helpless they are without God and how much they need him they will not find the gospel of Jesus Christ to be the most wonderful good news in the world.

### **God As Lord of The Nations**

Not only is God the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, but he is the Lord of the nations; all the nations and all human beings in the nations (v. 26). From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. This is not some kind of vague sovereignty. God rules over history. His will is ultimately determinative of all that transpires. He is not a localized, tribal

deity. He is not merely the God of certain races and classes of people. He is the God of all because every nation of men came from one man. There is no room for notions of racial or ethnic immunity or superiority. He is the only real God there is. Next to him all other things that are called gods are idols and illusions. They are nothing more than fictitious figments of the rebellious human imagination and of sinful human affections. The proclamation of this truth hits with the force of a bombshell. But it is a necessary explosion because as it is blessed by God it serves to bring human beings out of their dark spiritual hiding places and forces them to confront the living God. While there is much human diversity that can and should be celebrated, we are all one in that God is our Lord and he is the only one we should be worshipping, loving and obeying. This human solidarity also moves in another important direction. It is the necessary backdrop and sets the stage for the introduction of Jesus as the second Adam, the one man who can reverse the tragic affects of the fall, the Saviour of the world, the one mediator between God and men (cf. Rom.5:12-21; 1 Tim.2:5).

### **The God Who Actively Makes Himself Known**

But is this too much to ask? After all, what right does Paul have to make these assertions in Athens? How can God hold people accountable for things they have never before heard? Paul's answer is that God has made himself known (vs. 27-28). As Francis Schaeffer wrote some years ago; he is there and he is not silent. Paul tells us that God's actions in creation, preservation and providence were not meant to conceal but to reveal him. "*God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*" God is not playing hide-and-go-seek with the human race. He has not given us a series of crossword puzzles which if answered correctly will provide us with clues to his existence and person. His fingerprints are everywhere if only human beings had eyes to see. But this is the problem. They have eyes but they refuse to see. Refuse is the right word because the problem is a moral one. They refuse to use their eyes properly; they refuse to see and acknowledge what is right there in front of them. To prove his assertions Paul enlists the help of some pagan poets that many in the Areopagus would have been familiar with. The first quotation is from the Cretan Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.) and the second from the Cilician Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.) In their original contexts both poets are speaking of Zeus as the one "in whom we live and move and have our being" since "we are his offspring." Without in any way buying into their idolatrous veneration of Zeus, Paul introduces these quotations to make the more general point that men do know some very important things about God even though they refuse to worship him as God. While they ignorantly ascribe to Zeus what is only true of God alone, their ignorance reveals that at some level they do know that God is not far from them and that they are his creatures with all the responsibilities pertaining thereto. They are not innocent pagans. They are wilfully disobedient pagans who should know better because God has gone to the trouble of making himself known.

### **God's Appointed Man**

Having laid out these basic, fundamental, over-arching truths about God and man Paul now makes his move to Jesus. Had he not started where he did none of what follows would make sense to the members of the Areopagus. Given their presuppositions about reality these Athenians would not understand a call to repent of their idolatry in light of a coming day of judgment. They would not grasp how in the end it all comes down to one man, the man Christ Jesus. They would not see that he either saves or condemns them. The wonder of the resurrection of Jesus would elude them. This is not to say that they will all respond positively to Paul's gospel. A saving response to the gospel is far more than following a careful theological argument to its conclusion. But it is to say that the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul's gospel, only makes sense

within the biblical framework. Where people are ignorant of it, or misunderstand it, we must set it forth. We must tell them about the powerful, sovereign and yet loving God who creates, sustains, rules and reveals himself to men. We must tell them that they are God's creatures, that they were made to know and love God, that the entire race has gone astray and the greatest proof of this is the religious diversity that exists and the idolatrous veneration of people and things that are no gods at all.

What we must do is to bring people back to reality. Sinful human beings live in an unreal, fantasy world. We must re-establish such fundamentals as our responsibility to the sovereign and yet personal God of the Bible. Only then will human beings appreciate the danger and profundity of the human dilemma, and only then will Jesus make sense. If we fail to bring people back into God's world, Jesus will not make sense to them and they will either ignore us because they fail to see his relevance or they will impose on him their own meaning and turn him into another one of their helpless, worthless idols.

In verses 29-31 Paul drives his point home. If we as human beings are the unique products of God's creative activity, then we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. The theological notions of both the Epicureans and Stoics stand condemned. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. God's overlooking of past ignorance does not mean that it was excusable. It means that God was graciously patient and did not bring down on the race the immediate judgment that our sins deserve. But now something has happened. Now God commands all people everywhere to repent. Why the change? Because Jesus has come; the one man who can do something about the human predicament. The ultimate expression of who God is really like. Now that he has come and lived among us there is no excuse for idolatry and for bad theology. In fact he has made idolatry even more heinous than it was before. There is no reason to remain alienated from God and there is no reason to trust in anyone or anything else for salvation. Paul proclaims Jesus as the one appointed by God himself to judge the world with justice on the appointed day. God himself proved this assertion when he raised Jesus from the dead indicating that he is unique and special and the one with whom we have to make peace. Now it all makes sense! God, being who he is, and man being who he is, how could it be otherwise? Of course God will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed! And if the sovereign Creator wants to give proof of his intentions by raising him from the dead, why should the resurrection be considered difficult or impossible? And if such a man has been appointed and raised from the dead, surely the only thing to do is repent right away and make peace with him.

### **The Apostle Who Knew What He Was Doing**

Some have criticized Paul's address here in Athens as not being Christ-centred. Others have even gone so far as to suggest on the basis of 1 Cor.1:18-2:5, that Paul repudiated his approach in Athens and determined that from then on he would stick more closely to the message of Jesus and him crucified. While a creative approach to the text it is surely misguided. It is unthinkable that Paul would speak of the resurrection of Jesus without first speaking of his life, death and burial. When he was originally hauled before the council it was because they had heard reports of his speaking, "*the good news about Jesus and the resurrection*" (v. 18). We know from the rest of Paul's writings that Jesus and the resurrection are good news precisely because of the kind of representative death he died on behalf of sinners who had gone hopelessly astray and would have been lost forever without him (cf. Romans). The report of Paul's address here in Acts 17 is very compressed. Luke is highlighting the main features of the argument and especially those

features that were emphasized on that occasion. It is textually and theologically unwarranted to leap from what Paul says here in Acts 17 to 1 Corinthians 1-2 and conclude that he did not say enough about the cross of Christ in Athens. All of the main lines of gospel thought and proclamation are beautifully summarized in v. 31 in a way that brings the points Paul has made to a fitting and powerful conclusion.

As we watch Paul develop and present a comprehensive worldview we should learn a number of things. First, the importance of a biblical doctrine of God. Second, the need to set the Christian worldview over against other competing rivals. Third, the need to bring people into the reality of God's world as that reality is set forth in the Scriptures. And fourth, the need to shut people in with Jesus. At the end of the day there is no other way, no other Saviour, no other Judge.

Theological pluralism is an idolatrous evil. Our aim should be to bring every thought of every person into captivity to Christ (2 Cor.10:5).

#### **6. A Final Word about the Results**

According to vs. 32-34, *“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’ At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.”*

There were 3 different reactions. Some of them sneered, some expressed a desire to hear Paul again, and some believed the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. What is interesting about Paul's address to the Council is that revival did not immediately break out. Paul and Luke would have been the first to rejoice if it had, but it did not. Even though it was a highly skilled and educated apostle who spoke to the crowd. Even though he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Even though he brilliantly confronted these unbelievers with Jesus in a way that they could understand and did so because his heart was moved by their lost condition – most of those who heard him walked away unchanged. Paul did not get official permission to continue teaching in the city and we have no record of a church being established in Athens during the apostolic age. Some try to explain these results by saying that Paul's presentation of the gospel on this occasion was inadequate, a criticism we have already rejected. More to the point is the reminder that when all is said and done salvation belongs to the Lord. Paul knew this very well. In 1 Corinthians 3:5-7 he writes: *“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”*

Today there is an unhealthy emphasis on results. Consciously or unconsciously some people feel that evangelism is not really being done if there are no results. Or they believe that evangelism is being poorly done if there are not big results and significant numbers. But this is not the way it is. The time spent in Athens was not a total loss. Some did believe and glory alone will reveal the impact of Paul's very brief ministry in that city. We should never judge the accuracy or usefulness of what is said by the results. Rather we need to get our message from the Bible, present it faithfully and to the very best of our ability, and then leave the results with God. Understanding the needs of the current day and seeking to engage the people around us by developing and presenting a comprehensive worldview will not guarantee hundreds of converts or a church bursting at the seams with people trying to get in. But it is the place to start if we feel the lostness of those around us and we are grieved by a world swamped with idols. As we encounter more and more cultured pagans in our province of Ontario let us do our best to communicate to them the big picture in our efforts to bring them to Christ. Let us do so in faith

and with confidence knowing that God has indeed set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed – our resurrected Saviour! And let us plant and water the gospel seed entrusted to us knowing that God is able to make it grow!

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