

Paul's Athens Address

Compiled by Paul R. Blake

Introduction:

- A. Acts 17:16-34
- B. Paul's sermon title could have been "The God You Do Not Know."
 - 1. Acts 17:23 - "the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you"
- C. Acts is to the New Testament what Genesis is to the Old Testament: it is a book of firsts
 - 1. This is the first recorded sermon preached to intellectual unbelievers
 - 2. Where does one begin: with the plan of salvation, or with proving Jesus is the Son of God, or with the Bible is the inspired word of God?
 - 3. Begin where the audience is. The Athenians needed to know God before there would be any point in teaching them about salvation

I. SETTING FOR THE SERMON

- A. Acts 17:14-15 - The brethren press Paul to leave for his own safety.
- B. Acts 17:16 - Paul cannot stand to remain idle for long; he felt compelled when he saw the need for the word of God
- C. Acts 17:17 - He followed his pattern for preaching: he started in the synagogue with Jewish people and Gentile proselytes, and then went among the general public
- D. Acts 17:18 - He faced the intellectuals of his day
 - 1. Epicureans - "The followers of Epicurus, who acknowledged no gods except in name only, and absolutely denied that they exercised any government over the world or its inhabitants; and that the chief good consisted in the gratification of the senses. Familiar?"
 - 2. Stoics - The followers of Zeno did not deny the existence of the gods; but believed that all human affairs were governed by fate. They did not believe that any good was received from the hands of their gods; that any good and wise man was equal to Jupiter himself. Denied the resurrection of the body; and the immortality of the soul. Familiar?
 - 3. They mocked him. "What will this babblers say?" The word spermologos, translated as babblers, signifies literally as collector of seeds, and is the "name of a small bird the lives by picking up seeds on the road." The name was given to persons who collected the sayings of others, without understanding or organization, and repeated them to others in an attempt to appear wise. It was used to signify a shallow fraud.
 - a. A setter forth of strange gods was strictly forbidden, both at Rome and Athens
 - b. Paul began at a disadvantage. Familiar?
- E. Acts 17:19-21 - They give Paul an opportunity
 - 1. The Areopagus was a hill not far from the Acropolis, where the supreme court of justice was held; one of the most sacred and reputable courts that had ever existed in the Gentile world.

2. Their interest speaks of something inherent in the nature of man, the desire to solve the mystery of our existence - Acts 17:26-27

II. PAUL'S ATHENS ADDRESS

- A. The God you do not know - Acts 17:22-23
 1. deisidaimonesteros - "more religious than others; too superstitious" (Strong's). He is not complimenting them. "Greatly addicted to religious practices; fearers who deify demons; mad about idols"
- B. The God you need to know
 1. God is the Creator of the universe - Acts 17:24
 - a. He was before this universe; He dwells apart from this universe.
 - b. If He can create a universe as vast, powerful, and beautiful as this one, and not need to live in it; what use does He have for a temple within it?
 - c. If He can build this planet, and choose not to live in it, what use has He for a temple made from scraps of this planet?
 - d. 1Kings 8:27-30
 2. God is the Sustainer of life - Acts 17:25
 - a. He gives us life, breath and all that we need - James 1:17
 - b. Therefore God is not to be worshipped as though He needs our worship and offerings to sustain Him
 3. God is the Designer and Definer of human existence - Acts 17:26-28
 - a. What we are, what we can and cannot do, where we are going, and why we exist are based entirely on God's purposes, not the other way around.
 - b. We have free will and self determination only to the extent that fits into God's design for us; we are utterly dependent on Him.
 - c. We seek Him because our design compels us to seek
 - d. Aratus in his poem entitled Phaenomena, an homage to Jove, and Cleanthus in his Hymn to Jupiter are quoted the same words "In him we move and have our being." Synopsis Sohar, p. 104. "The holy blessed God never does evil to any man. He only withdraws his gracious presence from him, and then man necessarily perishes."
 - e. Rom. 1:20; Ecc. 12:13
 4. God is the Father of mankind - Acts 17:29
 - a. We are made in His image by His power, not the other way around. We are incapable of representing the best features of our nature; how can we possibly think that we can represent the Divine by material things?!
 5. God is the Judge of the world - Acts 17:30-31
 - a. Past ignorance based on limitations of the past; special mercy was granted for special circumstances; no such limits exist today, therefore, no special mercy.

- b. In other words, whether they want to believe it or not, unbelieving intellectuals will be subject to the judgment, no exceptions, no exemptions, no excuses
- c. Burying your head in the sand of modern wisdom and contemporary philosophy will not make the Judgment go away
- d. John 5:22, 26-27, 12:48

III. ATHEN'S ANSWER TO PAUL'S ADDRESS

- A. The mention of the resurrection provoked a response - Acts 17:32
 - 1. Some mocked, others offered to listen again at another time
 - 2. Some believed - Acts 17:33-34
 - a. Dionysius the Areopagite - One of the judges of the court; a great matter, as one does not get to be a judge in the Areopagus without being archon of the city of Athens, equivalent of being chief of the city council or mayor
 - b. Damaris, a woman believed to be wealthy, educated, and influential
 - c. Un-named others
 - 3. Little different from any other sermon preached in any other place so far

Conclusion:

- A. Whether Jew or Gentile, philosopher or farmer, the gospel of Christ is for all.
 - 1. Where we begin depends the spiritual condition of our audience
 - 2. Where we end must always be the same, with proclaiming the reality of sin, judgment, and the need for Jesus as the only way to salvation
- B. One's reaction to the gospel will always be one of three ways:
 - 1. Rejection ("some mocked")
 - 2. Reluctance ("others said, we will hear you again on this matter")
 - 3. Reception ("some men joined him and believed")