

PAUL'S SERMON TO THE COUNCIL OF ARES  
(Acts 17:22-34)

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Presented to  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements of  
Biblical Interpretation

Nazarene Bible College

Colorado Springs, CO

April 5, 2008

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## INTRODUCTION

### ORIENTATION AND CONTEXT

#### Significance of Text

The Apostle Paul wrote the following words to the Church in Corinth: “To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). This principle of meeting people where they are at in their own cultural setting when evangelizing them seems to be one of the primary lessons that can be learned through Paul’s ministry to the Athenians as recorded in Acts 17. This is certainly a principle that Jesus made use of when he ate in the homes of tax collectors (Mark 2:15-17), and also when He used analogies and examples from the lives of the working class people that He preached to, such as fishing and agriculture (Mat. 4:19, Mat. 13). Paul also made use of it when addressing the Jews in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch as he used the history of the Hebrew people to declare the Gospel of Christ to them (Acts 13:16-41).

While Paul was staying in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him, he became distressed at what he saw in the religious activities of the Athenians. Like Socrates over 400 years before him, Paul spent time preaching his message in the Agora. Also like Socrates, Paul was called upon to present his message to the Areopagus. As he stood up before this council, he appealed to the religiosity of the Athenians and seemed to speak favorably of it. He used the example of one of the altars that he had seen as a starting place to preach to the Athenian people about the God of the Hebrew tradition. He even used two lines from the Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus in support of his arguments. He contrasted the God of the Hebrews with the pagan concept of the gods by pointing out that the true God created all things and is not like an image created by humans. Having met the Athenians on a level that they could understand, Paul then

proceeded to declare to them the resurrection of Christ. Though some rejected his message, some became believers. Thus, Acts 17 provides a perfect example of Paul becoming “all things to all people, that [he] might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

### Historical and Social Setting

“The Acts of the Apostles”, more commonly known as “Acts”, was written as the sequel to The Gospel of Luke. This can be seen in the introductory verses of each of these two books. “I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:3-4). “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven . . .” (Acts 1:1-2). These two volumes were originally circulated together, but sometime during the end of the first century or beginning of the second century, the first volume began to be associated with the other three Gospels instead of with the second volume (Longenecker 207).

The author of Luke and Acts is traditionally believed to be Luke. This tradition can be traced back to at least the second century church father Irenaeus. Luke is referenced three times in the New Testament: Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24. Through these references, we learn that Luke was a physician and a companion of Paul. Acts is believed to have been written by one of Paul’s companions because there are several passages in Acts that use the first person plural “we” instead of the third person singular “he” (16:9-18, 20:5-21:18, and 27:1-28-16). Also, of all the companions of Paul mentioned in the New Testament, only Titus and Luke are not referred to by name in Acts. This implies that the “we” passages include at least Paul and whichever of these two is the author. In his commentary on Acts, Ralph Earle

writes, “When it comes to a choice between these two we can let the unanimous tradition of the Early Church settle the matter in favor of Luke” (*Acts* 250).

Luke gives us the purpose of his two volumes at the very beginning of his Gospel: “to write an orderly account [of the events that have been fulfilled among us] for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:3-4). He acknowledges that others have done this as well (Luke 1:1), which could be a reference to the other Gospels. Unlike the life of Jesus, though, Acts is the only source of information that we have on the activities of the early church, with the exception of some passing comments in Paul’s Epistles (Longenecker 207).

The immediate recipient of both Luke and Acts is named Theophilus. The introductory verses of these two books are the only two places where this individual’s name is found. In Luke, his name is preceded by “most excellent”, which was a title most often used for individuals of high social status. Theophilus means “friend of God”. In regard to this name and the readers of Luke and Acts, Marion Lloyd Soards, contributor to the study notes in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* writes, “While the address may be to a particular person, the symbolic sense of the name may designate any ideal Christian, as it has been understood since the earliest interpretations of Luke’s Gospel” (95).

There is considerable disagreement about when Acts was composed. Among those who believe that Luke was the authentic author, the standard dates given to Acts are either around A.D. 64 or anywhere between A.D. 80 and 95. The majority of modern scholars choose this later range of dates. Their rationale is based upon the belief that Luke, which certainly preceded Acts, was composed using the Gospel of Mark and the theoretical collection of first century material known as “Q” (Soards 94). These individuals hold to a later dating of Mark, therefore Luke and

Acts would both have been composed at a later date as well. Another reason that some place Luke later is their doubts of Jesus' prophetic ability. In Luke 19:43-44, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in A.D. 70. Some who hold to a composition of Luke after this time believe that Luke wasn't writing about one of Jesus' prophecies but rather writing about what he knew had already happened. Those who hold to the earlier date of Acts do so because this book ends with Paul living and preaching in peace in Rome. In A.D. 65, the Roman Emperor Nero began his terrible persecutions of the church (Longenecker 236-237). If Acts wasn't written until sometime after A.D. 80, why would Luke have made no mention of these persecutions, the martyrdom of Paul and Peter, and the destruction of Jerusalem?

Acts 17:22-34 takes place in the Greek city of Athens. The text tells us that there were Jews and God-fearing Gentiles there (Acts 17:17), but Athens was primarily a center of paganism. It was, in fact, named for the Greek goddess Athena. Athens had been the home of a number of Greek intellectuals, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. Although during the visit of Paul, Athens was a part of the Roman Empire, the Romans "were lovers of everything Greek, and under their rule Athens continued as the cultural and intellectual center of the world. Rome also left the city free politically to carry on her own institutions as a free city within the empire" (Longenecker 473).

The center of philosophical and religious dialogue in Athens was the marketplace, also known as the Agora (Earle, *Acts* 458). This was the location where, over 400 years before Paul's visit, the great philosopher Socrates spent his time teaching (Mahon, par. 2). Located in the northwest corner of the Agora was the Stoa Basileios where the Areopagus had met since the fifth century B.C. The Areopagus, or Council of Ares, was the ruling council of Athens. Socrates had been condemned to death before this same council in 399 B.C. (Mahon, par. 12) on

the charge of “not believing in the gods worshipped by the state and with the introduction of new deities in their stead and with the corruption of the young” (Todd 647).

The adversaries of Paul mentioned in Acts 17:18 were followers of the philosophical traditions of Epicurus and Zeno. Epicurus lived from 342 to 270 B.C., and he taught that “pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death” (Longenecker 473-474). He was a deist who believed that the gods took no interest in men. His followers were the Epicureans. Zeno lived from 340 to 265 B.C., and “his teaching centered on living harmoniously with nature and emphasized man’s rational abilities and individual self-sufficiency” (Longenecker 474). He was a pantheist, which is the belief that “God and the universe are one and that God is the combined manifestation of all the forces and phenomena in the existing universe” (Kurian 580). His followers were the Stoics (Longenecker 474).

### Literary Context

Acts is a historical narrative that records the early activities of the church and the Holy Spirit working within it. Within this narrative are also a number of speeches. Luke’s account of the speeches can be assumed to be paraphrases, “for certainly the original delivery contained more detail of argument and more illustrative material than Luke included” (Longenecker 230). This material should be considered to be historically accurate, but where speeches are concerned, it should be understood that these are abridgements.

Acts 1 thru 7 record the establishment of the church in and around Jerusalem. Chapters 8 thru 10 show how the church began to spread throughout the region. The remaining chapters record the expansion of the church throughout the entire Mediterranean basin (Varughese 172,

188). Chapters 1 thru 12 seem to focus on the activities of Peter and the other original apostles, whereas chapters 13 thru 28 seem to focus on the activities Paul and his associates.

The text that will be the focus of this paper is Acts 17:22-34. This passage begins with Paul's address to the Areopagus. It concludes with the Areopagus' reaction to Paul's message, including some who rejected it and some who became believers. Located immediately before this passage is the background material of why Paul was asked to appear before the Areopagus. He had left Beroea and was waiting for Timothy and Silas to join him in Athens before resuming his missionary activities. However, when he observed the paganism of the Athenians, he could not remain silent. He began preaching the Gospel in the synagogue to the local Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, and he also preached in the Agora to anybody who happened to be around. It was while he was doing this that the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers accused him of being a babbler and declaring foreign gods. Wanting a further explanation of what he was teaching, they asked him to appear before the Areopagus. After he delivered his message and was dismissed, he went on to Corinth where he joined Aquila and Priscilla, refugees from Emperor Claudius' persecution of the Christians in Italy, in their profession of tent-making.

### PRESENTATION OF TEXT

#### Scripture Passage

Acts 17:22 Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup>For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup>The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup>nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives

to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup>From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup>so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup>For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ <sup>29</sup>Since we are God’s offspring we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup>While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup>because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

32 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup>At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup>But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (NRSV)

### Text Critical Notes

The verses given here from the New Revised Standard Version all reflect this translation’s attempt to be gender inclusive when a passage clearly has both men and women in mind. This is contrasted with the New International Version, which keeps the gender as it originally appeared. The differences can be seen in verses 22, 25, 26, 27, 29, 31, and 34.

### Outline of Passage

- I. Paul’s Message to the Athenians
  - A. The Athenians are Religious
  - B. God can be Known

- C. Christ Rose from the Dead and will Judge the World
- II. The Athenians' Reaction to Paul's Message
    - A. Some Scoffed
    - B. Some Invited Paul Back
    - C. Some Believed

### PAUL'S MESSAGE TO THE ATHENIANS

Like Socrates before him, Paul was called upon to make a defense of his teachings to the Areopagus. As mentioned previously, the accusation against Socrates was that he did not believe in the state sanctioned gods but rather taught new ideas. This parallels the accusation that the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers made against Paul that instigated his summons to the Areopagus, "he seems to be advocating foreign gods" (Acts 17:18 NIV), and also their question to him before that council: "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean" (Acts 17:19-20 NIV). Unlike Socrates, however, Paul wasn't being formally charged by the state. The Areopagus was not only responsible for convicting criminals; it was also responsible for making decisions in regard to religion. This council could decide whether or not Paul could legally continue to preach the Gospel in Athens. So his summons before the Areopagus was most likely done in order that a decision could be made to legitimize or reject his message (Whitelaw 370-372).

Paul's defense to the questioning of the philosophers does not actually take the form of a defense; rather, he uses this opportunity to preach the Gospel to the leaders of Athens. Paul frequently uses this tactic when called upon to defend his actions. He did so when he was arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27-22:22) and also when he appeared before King Agrippa (Acts

26:1-32). Agrippa even recognized this when he asked Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (Acts 26:28 NIV). Paul confirmed it when he replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:29 NIV).

Paul begins by appealing to the religious nature of the Athenians. The King James Version records Acts 17:22 in this way: “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.” Earle writes, however, that “for Paul to have said, ‘I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious’ (KJV) would have been very unwise, especially in addressing the intelligentsia of Athens” (*Word Meanings* 114). A better translation is that which is found in the NRSV, “extremely religious”, or the NIV, “very religious”.

The Greek word “deisidaimon”, which is translated “extremely religious”, only appears in this one place, although a close variation of it, “deisidaimonia”, translated “religion”, is found in one other place as well. This place is Acts 25:19: “Instead they had certain points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.” These two words are both combinations of the Greek words “deos” and “daimonion”. In the NIV, “deos” is interpreted as awe, fear, or reverence, and “daimonion” is interpreted as demon or god (Goodrick 1538-1539).

According to Christopher R. Matthews, contributor to the study notes in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, “*Extremely religious*, can be taken in a good or bad sense. It connects to “idols” in v. 16 and leads to v. 23” (219). When “deisidaimonia” is used in Acts 25:19, it is used by Festus, who was not a Jew and would not have understood the monotheism of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Thus, both “deisidaimon” and “deisidaimonia” seem to be used in their few

occurrences as positive references to those who are pious in their pagan faith. Earle writes, “Paul was not the kind of man to show disrespect for such an audience as he faced in Athens” (*Acts* 461). His appeal to the religiosity of the Athenians seems to be, therefore, a way that he chose to positively address them in beginning his message.

In order to illustrate his observation of their piousness, Paul explains that he had gone throughout their city observing their “objects of worship”. One of these objects particularly caught Paul’s eye: “an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” This was the point of contact that Paul used to reach into the world of the Athenians and draw them into an understanding of the true God of the Judeo-Christian faith. Longenecker writes, “Later the second-century geographer Pausanias and the third-century philosopher Philostratus were to speak of altars to unknown gods at Athens” (475). According to Matthews, there has not yet been such an inscription found in Athens (219), but Longenecker states that “it is not surprising that Paul came across such an altar in walking about the city” (475). Matthews goes on to say that “the scene intends to illustrate the anxiety of the ‘extremely religious’ lest the honor due to any deity be inadvertently omitted” (219).

Having caught their attention, Paul precedes to explain to the Athenians that, despite the inscription on this altar, God can, in fact, be known. This altar gave Paul “an opening to *proclaim* the Christian message” (Matthews 219), and he proceeds to do so. He first proclaims God as Creator. According to Whitelaw, this was contrary to the beliefs of both groups of philosophers who listened to him (374). “According to the Epicureans and Stoics matter existed from eternity” (Whitelaw 378). This was Paul’s first point of conflict with the Athenians, but it was absolutely necessary to acknowledge God as Creator before his message could be perceived. The Jewish audiences, who were the subject of most of the rest of the speeches in Acts, already

acknowledged this fact, so it was an unnecessary element when addressing them. Many of the Athenians, though, did not acknowledge it, or even know about it, so they had to be instructed in the creation before they could be told the Gospel.

Paul then proclaims that God is not only the Creator, but He is also the Lord of all things. Whitelaw states that “the Greek philosophers had no true conception of the moral and spiritual rule of this Divine being” (378). This can certainly be seen in Socrates’ dialogue with Euthyphro as recorded by Plato: “Then according to your argument, my good Euthyphro, different gods consider different things to be just, beautiful, ugly, good, and bad, for they would not be at odds with one another unless they differed about these subjects, would they?” (9). Certainly the deistic understanding of the Epicureans would have required a rejection of the concept of God being an active Lord of the heavens and the earth since they reject the idea that God, or even *the gods*, actively participate with humankind. Also, the pantheistic Stoics did not believe in an individualized conception of Godhood, so they too would have rejected this argument.

Next, Paul argues that since God is Creator and Lord, he cannot live in structures made by humans or be served by human hands. This is not an idea that would have been completely foreign to the Athenians. The fifth century B.C. Athenian tragic poet Euripides asked this question, as recorded by Longenecker: “What house built by craftsmen could enclose the form divine within enfolding walls?” (476). According to Whitelaw, Paul was here showing the Athenians that God transcends all their beliefs about the gods since in their system, each god must remain within its individual shrine and is dependent upon humans to serve it (374).

Paul then explains the common ancestry of all humankind. All people in all nations are descended from one common ancestor. This idea was “contrary to the Athenians’ boast that they had originated from the soil of their Attic homeland and therefore were not like other men”

(Longenecker 476). The idea presented here by Paul that God determined the times and boundaries of all humankind would have been contrary to the deism of the Epicureans

(Longenecker 476). The purpose of the common ancestry of humankind and the God-ordained times and locations of each individual was so that “men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him” (Acts 17:27 NIV).

Paul explains that God “is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). Though the deistic Epicureans would have rejected this idea, it may have appealed to the pantheistic Stoics, who believed that god consisted of all matter. In seeking to appeal to them, Paul quotes two of their poets: Epimenides and Aratus. The line from Epimenides, “In him we live and move and have our being”, derives from his poem *Critica* and is spoken by Minos in regards to his mythical father, Zeus. The line from Aratus is also in its original context a reference to Zeus, and the full line is as follows: “It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, for we are also his offspring” (Longenecker 476). Longenecker explains that Paul isn’t trying to equate God with Zeus. He is rather showing the Athenians that their own poets have already grasped some of the realities of God, and he is meeting them where they are at theologically so that they might be able to grasp the Gospel message (476). Paul has reinterpreted the original pagan understanding of these quotations to match the Judeo-Christian concept of who God is.

The King James Version records verse 29 as follows: “Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device”. The usage of “the Godhead” here, though, is not a good translation. The NRSV uses, instead, “the deity”, and the NIV uses “the divine”. The Greek word used here is “theios” and is used only here and two other times: “His divine [theios] power has given us everything we need . . . you may participate in the divine [theios] nature . . .” (2

Peter 1:3-4). This word is closely related to “theos”, which is used much more frequently in the New Testament. “Theos” is most often used as a reference to God, although it does refer to pagan gods in some situations (Goodrick 1557). “Theos” is what is used earlier in this verse when Paul refers to “God’s offspring” (Goodrick 467). The proper rendering of “theios” as “the deity”, as opposed to the KJV’s “the Godhead”, seems to be a more generic reference to the concept of a higher power, whereas “theos” is used directly in regard to God. It would seem that Paul uses the form “theos” initially to continue on with his argument that the Judeo-Christian God is the one true God. He then, however, uses “theios” as a more generic reference to “the deity”. He does this in an attempt to contrast the eternal nature of God with the pagan concept of *the gods* while still remaining on a level in which he can relate to the Athenians.

Having appealed to the religiosity of the Athenians, and then having explained to them, on a level that they could understand, that God can, in fact, be known, Paul begins his presentation to them of the Gospel message that Christ rose from the dead and will judge the world. He begins by stating that “God has overlooked the times of human ignorance” (Acts 17:30). This can be compared to what Paul spoke previously to those in Lystra: “In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways” (Acts 14:16). Similar words can also be found in his letter to the church in Rome: “In his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25). The time for such forbearance has come to an end, though, and “now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

The purpose given for repentance in this passage is that a day has been determined when the whole world will be judged by Christ. Paul states that Christ’s resurrection took place partially as assurance that this judgment will take place. Earle writes, “This is a part of the Easter message that is seldom proclaimed. The Resurrection is the proof to men, God’s

guarantee, that there will be a judgment day, when all mankind will be judged. It is a sobering thought” (*Acts* 463). According to Whitelaw, on this day of judgment, Christ will "adjudicate upon the final destinies of men, according as they had repented and believed the gospel, or died in unbelief and sin” (376). Paul calls the Athenians to repentance, therefore, so that they will be deemed righteous on the day of judgment. Christ’s resurrection is proof that this day will eventually come.

#### THE ATHENIANS’ REACTION TO PAUL’S MESSAGE

Having come to the high point and purpose of his message in presenting the Gospel to the Athenians, they begin to react to what Paul has been saying. Prior to mentioning the resurrection, they remained silent and listened to his arguments. Having mentioned this focal point of the Christian faith, however, they could no longer do so. Whitelaw writes the following:

Never before had either Stoic or Epicurean listened to sentiments so sublime, or to an orator more worthy of attention. Yet at the mention of the resurrection of the dead—a doctrine which both denied—they felt it impossible to longer remain silent or allow the speaker to proceed. Did they do so, they might seem to grant that such a thing as a resurrection was possible, while according to their philosophy it was not. (376)

The reaction of some of the Athenians was that they scoffed at his message. This is not an unusual reaction to the Gospel being preached. On the day of Pentecost, when the 120 men and women were filled with the Holy Spirit, they were sneered at and accused of being drunk (*Acts* 2:13). The idea of a resurrection was particularly ridiculous to the Athenians, though. The tragic poet Aeschylus, who lived from 525 to 456 B.C., recorded these supposed words of the god Apollo at the establishment of the Areopagus: “When the dust has soaked up a man’s blood,

once he is dead, there is no resurrection” (Longenecker 478). The very council that was listening to Paul’s case, then, was established with the idea that resurrection was impossible. To hear someone speak of such an occurrence was the height of foolishness. However, Paul wrote the following to those in Corinth, which was another Greek city:

But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:23-25)

Not everybody scoffed at Paul’s message. Some invited him back to speak to them again. Of these individuals, Longenecker writes, “Others, probably with more politeness than curiosity of conviction, suggested that they would like to hear Paul on the subject at another time” (478). Matthews, however, says that “others were intrigued” (220). The fact that they would invite him to come back at a later time seems to imply that they thought he was at least worth listening to, whether or not they thought there was any merit to what he had to say. This could simply be a reflection of what Luke says about the Athenians in verse 21: “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new”.

Despite the rejection by some and the non-commitment of others, some that heard Paul’s message did, in fact, become believers. These included Dionysius, who was a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris. Of the conversion of Dionysius, Earle writes, “It was a great victory to win one convert out of this very select group of about thirty persons” (*Acts* 463). Eusebius records that Dionysius became the bishop of the Athenian church, and Chrysostom records that Damaris was his wife. Whitelaw states, however, that there is no solid

evidence of either of these facts (376). Nothing is known of the Athenian church after this time, and Paul's mission there is frequently considered to have been a failure. However, Longenecker writes that "There were some converts at Athens, and we should not minimize the working of God's Spirit or Paul's message because only a few responded or because we don't know what happened to them afterward" (478). He goes on to attribute the lack of further developments in Athens to the attitudes of its people and not to Paul's message or methods (478).

## CONCLUSION

### SUMMATION

As Paul stood before the Areopagus, he saw not an opportunity to defend his message, but rather an opportunity to spread his message further among the Athenian people. He began his sermon by appealing to the religious nature of the Athenians. He complemented their pursuit of religion and explained how he had seen this displayed as he toured their city.

Paul used one of the altars found in Athens as a starting point to explain to the Areopagus the truth about God. Although this altar was inscribed "To an unknown God", Paul explained to the Athenians that God can, in fact, be known. Unlike some of the common Athenian philosophical beliefs, God is the Creator of everything. In addition to being the Creator, God is an active Lord of all creation that does not live in human-built structures, nor is He sustained by the hands of those He created. The Athenians did not derive from a unique source as their traditions taught, but, like all of humankind, they descended from a common ancestor created by God.

Paul explained to the Athenians that God ordained the times and locations of all humanity for one purpose: to search for and find Him. Paul appealed to his Stoic listeners, who were pantheists, by explaining that God is near everyone. He even reinterprets historical Athenian

texts that his audience would have been familiar with to help support his argument. One of these texts, under Paul's reinterpretation, establishes that we are the offspring of God.

According to Paul's sermon, since humankind is God's offspring, it should not be believed that the supernatural can be crafted by human arts. In a previous era God may have overlooked such ignorance, but a time has come for all of humanity to repent. A day has been established for judgment to take place, and a righteous Man has been appointed to be the Judge. This time of judgment is confirmed by the fact that He who will serve as Judge has been raised from the dead.

Paul meets the Athenians where they are at theologically, speaks positively to them to gain their attention, and makes mention of philosophical ideas that they are familiar with. As he does this, he begins to correct their misconceptions about the divine, and he reinterprets their traditions to fit within the truth about who God really is. Having explained to the Athenians the nature of God in a way that they can understand, he then tells them that they must repent. A day of judgment is before them, and the righteous Judge has been resurrected as evidence of this.

Once Paul mentioned the resurrection, some of the Athenians began to ridicule him. According to their traditions, no resurrection was possible. Though he may have been successful at reinterpreting some of their traditions, there is no way around the fact that the resurrection is the focal point of the Gospel, and this was simply unacceptable to some of Paul's listeners. Some of the Athenians, though, invited him to return and speak to them again. This may have only been politeness, it may have been an example of the Athenians wanting to continue in spending "their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21), or it may have been authentic inquisitiveness and interest in his message. Finally, some of the Athenians did, in fact, become believers, and these included at least one member of their ruling council.

There is no evidence that there was a major revival in Athens, but the importance of the conversion of at least a few of the Athenians should not be diminished.

#### APPLICATION

There is a church in Seattle whose statement of who they are begins with the following paragraph:

When the apostle Paul stood atop Mars Hill, he proclaimed good news to a diverse people steeped in philosophy, culture, and spirituality. Mars Hill Church seeks to continue that legacy in modern-day Seattle. Our city is a place much like first-century Athens: a marketplace of ideas, a vibrant arts community, and a metropolitan hub. (“Who We Are”, par. 1)

This church understands that today’s culture is very similar to the one that could be found in Athens, and other centers of the Roman Empire, in the first century. Cities like Athens were locations where diverse groups from around the known world gathered together and shared art, philosophy, and religion. Today, with the modern innovations in transportation and media, the world is more connected than it has ever been before. The marketplace of ideas is even vaster now than the Agora of Athens was when Paul visited it.

Like Paul, contemporary Christians need to stand up in this modern-day Agora and proclaim the Gospel message. They should not expect those who are lost to come find them at their churches. Rather, believers need to go to the lost and call them to repentance where they are at. In doing so, they should follow the example of Paul before the Areopagus. Paul did not approach these Greek philosophers with agricultural analogies, nor did he recite to them Hebrew history. Instead, he met them where they were at theologically and used their own traditions and

philosophies as starting points to present the Gospel to them. Likewise, Christians today need to grasp a hold of today's culture and use it to present Christ to a lost world.

This can be done by using the various forms of media, such as movies, music, TV, periodicals, and the internet, that dominate the world today. When using these techniques, though, it should be remembered that the post-modern society isn't as interested in the means used as it is in knowing that those delivering the message truly care about them and are authentic in their beliefs. Christians should, therefore, be aware of the thoughts, concerns, and passions of the world around them, and they should truly seek to understand the cultural trends. In doing so, they will be able to relate to those they seek to evangelize, and as these individuals feel the love and authenticity of those ministering to them, they will be more likely to repent and believe. Though some may scoff, and others may be non-committal, some will, undoubtedly, accept the Gospel, Just as Dionysius the Areopagite did. Following Paul's example, Christians today need to "become all things to all people, that [they] might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).

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