



Acts of the Apostles
A DEEP DIVE INTO THE BOOK OF ACTS.

WEEK 10
 CLASS BY PASTOR GLYN NORMAN

Paul at Athens Acts 17:16-34

Athens background

Athens was named in honor of the goddess Athena. Reached its height under Pericles (495-429 BC) and during the last fifteen years of his life, the Parthenon, numerous temples and other splendid buildings were built. Literature, philosophy, science and rhetoric flourished and Athens attracted intellectuals from all over the world. Politically it became a democracy.

The Romans conquered Athens in 146 BC. They were lovers of Greek culture and 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.

When Paul visited Athens, it had lost much of its greatness, empire and wealth, but continued to live on its glorious past. Its population was probably no more than ten thousand. Its temples were related to the worship of the Greek pantheon (collection of gods) and its culture was pagan. Paul's background was Jewish and this meant that he found their idolatry and the culture of Athens deeply disturbing.

1. Paul starts a ministry (Acts 17:16-21)

- Paul could not keep himself from speaking in the face of such idolatry. He reasons (*dielegeto*) with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the synagogue and continues his presentation in the market (*agora*) every day, to those who would listen. The agora was the forum and marketplace of Athens life, and thus was central and strategic.

- The religious/philosophical background of Athens

Athens was the home of two rival philosophical schools, Epicurean and Stoic.

Epicurus (342-270 BC) believed that pleasure was the main goal of life, and that the greatest pleasure was a life of tranquility free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears and anxiety about death. He did not deny the existence of gods, but claimed that they were not involved in the lives of men.

The Cypriote Zeno (340-265 BC) was the founder of Stoicism (which took its name from the painted Stoa, or portico where he habitually taught in the Athens agora). His teaching focused on living in harmony with nature, man's rational abilities and individual self-sufficiency.

The followers of Epicurus and Zeno start to dispute with Paul in the agora, but others think Paul is advocating foreign gods perhaps mistaking the word Anastasis (resurrection) for a goddess consort of a god called Jesus.

- The followers of Epicurus and Zeno bring Paul to the Areopagus, probably seeking to humiliate him and reveal him as a poor philosopher but the city fathers took the task seriously because of their reputation as an intellectual center where competing philosophies could fight it out. The result would be either that Paul would either receive the freedom of the city to speak, or be banned.

2. Paul's address at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31)

- v22,23 Paul does NOT begin his address by referring to Jewish history or by quoting the Jewish scriptures as he did in Pisidian Antioch (cf. 13:16-41). It would have made no sense to refer to a history that they did not know, or to fulfillment of prophecies that they were unaware of. Why quote from a book that the audience did not consider authoritative?

Question: What use should we make of the Bible in our own witnessing, if most people don't accept it as the Word of God, or as authoritative? Any? None? Some?

Nor does he refer to the action of God in nature who gives rain for the crops in their season and food for the stomach and joy for the heart, as he did at Lystra (cf. 14:15-17).

Instead he finds a **point of contact**. It is the altar to the unknown god that he saw in the city. Later archeology has found such altars in Athens. Paul shows his genius in adapting the message to make it appropriate for his audience. This is no surprise for the apostle claimed that he was willing to be "all things to all men" for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:20-22).

Question: What are some key "points of contact" that we might use as an introduction to sharing Jesus in today's society? What common elements of the human experience might the gospel address?

The substance of the address to the Athenians is:

the nature of God and the responsibility of man to God.

- contrary to pantheistic and polytheistic notions, it is one God who created the world and everything in it
- he does not live in temples made by human hands
- he is not dependent for his existence on anything he has created
- he is the source of life and breath for everything that has been created.
- God has placed nations and peoples where he wants them (no special privilege in being Athenian), so that they would seek him

Paul quotes two Greek poets, in making further points of contact. The first is a quote from Epimenides (c.600 BC) from his poem *Cretica* and the lines are put on the lips of Minos, Zeus's son, in honor of his father:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one –
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!

But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever.
For in thee we live and move and have our being.
 (my italics)

The second comes from the poet Aratus (c.315-240 BC) from *Phaenomena* 5:

It is with Zeus that every one of us in every way has to do, *for we are also his offspring*" (my italics)

Paul is not saying that his god is to be thought of in the same terms as Zeus, but showing that the poets have in some way confirmed his message about the nature of the real god. He finds common ground, but then re-interprets the meaning for his own purposes, "disinfecting and rebaptizing the poets' words." (Longenecker, *Acts*, p.476)

Quoting their poets to back up his message was a great strategy.

3. The response to Paul's address (Acts 17:32-34)

- the resurrection is not convincing proof to many of them. They probably did believe in the immortality of the soul, but a physical resurrection was foolishness to them. Some scorned him; some said they would like to hear him again, whether from politeness or genuine interest we do not know. Some did however believe.
- the gospel did not therefore really take root in Athens, and this trip could be considered mostly a failure, though this is probably more to do with the attitude of the Athenians rather than the strategy and message of Paul.

Note the overall pattern of Paul:

1. **He is emotionally distressed** because these people do not know the one true God. For him it is not just an intellectual issue – he is deeply moved by their ignorance and lostness.
2. **He does his research.** Becomes aware of the idols. Knows their cultural forms e.g. poetry. Knows their religious background (Epicureanism and Stoicism). Is aware of the Altar to the Unknown God.
3. **He uses their own cultural forms** (the altar to the Unknown God, their poets Epimenides and Aratus) as a vehicle for communicating Christian truth, in a way that is appropriate to that audience, focusing in his speech on:
 - the nature of God
 - and the responsibility of man to God.