

11. Conversion of the Athenians—Acts 17

The first 15 verses of Acts 17 records the travels of Paul and his companions from Philippi to Athens. Paul spoke of this time in Phil 4:14-16: "Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need." Acts 17:3 illustrates how Paul preached the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. After a mob threatened Paul and Silas, the brothers sent them to Berea (Acts 17:5-10). History has recognized the Bereans for Luke's praise in Luke 17:11, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." Agitation by the Jews from Thessalonica resulted in Paul's going to Athens, where the events unfold surrounding one of Paul's most famous sermons.



Paul Immediately Preached the Good News about Jesus and the Resurrection

Acts 17:16-21 *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. 18 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. 19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." 21(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

Athens, a city full of idols, distressed Paul. Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue but also took the gospel to the people in the marketplace. Here, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers challenged Paul who was fulfilling the Great Commission by preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection to all men.

The Epicureans. The Epicureans followed the philosophy of Epicurus who was born on the island of Samos in 341 BC, and who taught first in Asia Minor and afterward in Athens till his death in 270 BC. The philosophy spread widely in Asia Minor. (Notes from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.)

Epicurus taught:

"The aim and end of life for every man is his own happiness, and happiness is primarily defined as pleasure. 'Wherefore we call pleasure the Alpha and Omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing'" (Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.).

Epicurus used the phrases *alpha and omega* and *blessed life* to describe his pleasure-dominated philosophy. His birth off the coast of Asia Minor on Samos and the spread of his popular, hedonistic philosophy across the region, give great meaning to these phrases as used by Lord God, the Almighty, and Christ the Lord in the Revelation. In Rev 1:8, God said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." An Epicurean audience would know immediately that God was attacking their hedonistic philosophy directly. Blessedness is not in pleasure; it is in the Lord God, the almighty. God repeated the same strong teaching in Rev 21:6-8 at the completion of his revelation:

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega , the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

God sets the inheritance of the faithful against the tragic second death of pleasure-seekers of every kind. In Rev 22:13-15, Jesus takes the *alpha and omega* characteristic unto himself, promising the tree of life and entrance through the heavenly city to the truly *blessed*. The evil and pleasure-seekers remain outside:

13 I am the Alpha and the Omega , the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

The Revelation also makes clear the truly blessed are not the pleasure-seekers but those who follow the Lord:

- 3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. Rev 1:3.
- 13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." Rev 14:13
- 15 "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." Rev 16:15
- 9 Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God." Rev 19:9
- 6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. Rev 20:5-6
- 7 "Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book." Rev 22:7

In the 21st century, efforts to make worship the feel-good province of the praise worshipers have echoes of the problems confronted by the churches of Asia Minor and Greece. Truth comes only from God and those who worship him must worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). It is not the feelings of the worshiper that counts but the pleasure of God.

The Stoics. The name, Stoic, was derived from the Stoa Poikile, the painted porch at Athens, where the founders of the school first lectured. This school of Greek philosophy was founded at Athens circa 294 BC by Zeno (circa 336 BC - 264 BC), a native of Citium, a Greek colony in Cyprus. But the Semitic race predominated in Cyprus, and it has been conjectured that Zeno was of Semitic rather than Hellenic origin. This would have given him close ties to the religions of the Samaritans and Hebrews, both of which looked to the almighty God of the five books of Moses. It is from this background that Paul refers to an unknown god in Acts 16:23. Zeno's Greek critics taunted him with being a Phoenician. It has, therefore, been suggested that the distinctive moral tone of the system was Semitic and not Hellenic. Centers, among others, were Tarsus and Sidon. Paul, who was formerly Saul of Tarsus, would have been fully informed of the Stoic precepts. In the 2nd century B.C. the doctrine was brought to Rome where it spread widely among the upper classes of Roman society. The system acquired its most lasting influence by its adoption as the formative factor in the jurisprudence of imperial Rome, and Roman law in its turn contributed to the formation of Roman Catholic doctrine and ethics. The main principles of Stoicism may be summarized:

- Adherents follow nature.
- The law of Nature is reason (logos)--the principle of intelligence in man, and the divine reason imminent in the world.
- Their metaphysics inclined to be a materialistic pantheism. On the one side, Nature is the organization of material atoms by the operation of its own uniform and necessary laws. On the other side, it is a living, rational being, subduing all its parts to work out a rational purpose inherent in

the whole. As such, it may be called Providence or God.

[These notes on the Stoics are in part from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003 by BibleSoft, Inc.]

Paul Addresses the Philosophers

Acts 17:22-23: *22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 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.*

The Areopagus jutted out from the Acropolis. It was here that five centuries earlier, Socrates had faced his accusers. The very substance and tone of Paul's address sides him with the Stoics who held a concept of one God, however, a pantheistic (i.e. god extends throughout creation) one. Paul declares that he is going to make the unknown God known to them.

Acts 17:24-28: *24 "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 hands. 25 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. 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. 27 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 one of us. 28'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

Paul is not talking to Jews and God-fearing Greeks as in Acts 17:17. He is talking to Greek philosophers. The beginning of his persuasion is not to start with Christ raised from the dead, but with God, the creator of all things. He concludes his sermon with Christ whom God raised from the dead. The God Paul preached was neither pantheistic nor polytheistic. This God made everything; man makes nothing; and certainly not gods, made with hands and temples where they live. The origin and purpose of man, according to Paul, was to receive life and breath and everything else from God. This is the same teaching as that of Genesis Gen 2:7: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." The duty of man is to reach out for God for in him we live, move, and have our being. Therefore, the true religion comes from God and not from the mind of man or from man figuring out God. This difference continues today, even though many believe that the religion of God and Christ comes by development through their own minds—individually and collectively. When religious groups speak today from a prophet, pope, priest, king, synod, presbytery, assembly, council, or convention, they do not speak from God. These ancient and modern rationalists are described accurately by Paul in 1 Cor 1:20-25:

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Paul Closes with the Gospel of the Resurrection and the Command to Repent

Acts 17:29-31: *29 "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. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 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."*

Man is the offspring of God; and, therefore, the divine being cannot be an image made by man. In what way did God overlook such ignorance?

Paul writes in Rom 2:14-15,

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now

accusing, now even defending them.

The universality of the *all men* of the Great Commission is the same as *all people, everywhere*. The entire phrase, including the command to repent is the same as the Lord's command in Luke 24:47-48, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." The idea indicting both the Epicureans and Stoics is that God 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. The entire purpose of man is not flesh and pleasure (Epicureans) or mind and reason (Stoics), but it is to repent and obey the Father. He will judge all by that obedience. The proof of Paul's position is that God raised his son from the dead. That the flesh dies and with it the mind, but the spirit lives on offends Stoics and Epicureans alike. Modern religionists, who must find out that their own thoughtout constructs of religion are of no profit, will respond as the philosophers of Athens responded.

Conclusion

Acts 17:32-34: 32 *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."* 33 *At that, Paul left the Council.* 34 *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.*

The resurrection of the dead was the binding point. Without a Christ, there can be no resurrection of the dead. No amount of earthly pleasure or wisdom can offer eternal life. In spite of the response of those that sneered, "A few men became followers of Paul and believed." The Lord had said in Matthew's account of the great commission to make disciples. Here, Luke calls them followers. In Mark's account, the Lord had said that the one who believes and is baptized shall be saved. Here the followers believed. Paul and the followers had fulfilled the commands of the Great Commission.

Study Questions

Where was the Areopagus? _____

For what was it used? _____

Who were the Stoics? _____

Who were the Epicureans? _____

Why did the Stoics have more in common with Paul's teaching? _____

Why can idols not be God's? _____

What does God command of all people, everywhere? _____

What will happen on God's set day of Judgment? _____

Who was raised from the dead? _____

Who will be judged? _____

What proof did God give all men? _____