

## **BELIEVE**

Acts 17:22-34

In taking the Gospel to the Gentile world, Paul encountered a lot of different world views or philosophies that people who had been exposed to various cultures which had inoculated them with preconceived ideas of reality. As Luke chronicled the spread of the Gospel (the true reality), he shared with us a variety of approaches that Paul (and Barnabas or Silas) took with these different cultures. In previous studies we had noted that in areas that lacked a strong connection to the teachings of the Old Testament that God had intervened with divine power to confirm the messages that Paul delivered. Without supernatural interventions such as the healing miracles and other happenings, much of what Luke recorded would be impossible to explain. The success of spreading the gospel was tied to the supernatural interventions of God through the gifts and enabling of the Holy Spirit.

After Philippi, Paul went to Thessalonica and was able to share the Gospel in the synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths. Many Jews and devout Greeks believed his message and that stirred up opposition among the non-believing Jews. The official objection lodged against him was that he was teaching something that was in violation of the “government approved position” that Caesar was the only king. Paul’s message was that Jesus is king. In taking the position they did; these non-believing Jews just reaffirmed the apostasy of the high priest and the Jews of Jerusalem that happened two decades earlier before the crucifixion of Jesus when they said “We have no king but Caesar.”

Paul moved to Berea and was initially well received until the troublemakers from Thessalonica came to create a public protest and Paul went to Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea to work with the new believers.

Athens was one of the intellectual centers of that time and had been for hundreds of years. However, like so much of the world today, people were “ever learning, but never coming to the knowledge of the truth.” The Greeks considered themselves to be the philosophical and cultural elite. Greek culture and language were pervasive throughout the known world since Alexander’s conquests. The political thought, however, was definitely Roman and there was a time of “peace” that was forcibly imposed by the Roman armies. Religious ideas were anything but uniform and ranged from emperor worship to mystical religions with a scattering of Greek and Roman mythology stirred into the mix.

The main two philosophies that dominated the debates and discussions in the intellectual forums in Athens were Epicureanism and Stoicism. These philosophies had been around for centuries and while there were significant differences, both wanted to achieve a condition of having a peace of mind that transcends all circumstances, and the way to it was the life according to Nature. In other words, regardless of what happens they would not be upset by it.

Paul went to the synagogue in Athens and he also spoke to people in the forum of the marketplace (agora) and presented the Gospel message. Some commentators have noted that “The debates in the marketplace led to more misunderstanding than enlightenment.” I guess the equivalent of the marketplace forums today would be social media where various people present their ideas and insult one another which also produces more confusion than understanding.

An insult directed at Paul was that he was “a babbler,” or more literally, “a seed picker.” What they heard in his messages seemed to them to be bits and pieces of their own systems of beliefs. Some of the philosophers thought that Paul was promoting two new divine beings that were unknown to them. They assumed that Paul’s mention of Iesous (Jesus) and Anatisis

(resurrection) were references to foreign (to them) divinities. In much earlier times advocating foreign gods was a serious crime. This was the very crime of which the great philosopher Socrates had been accused, also in Athens, some 450 years earlier, and which led to his death.

Apparently, these philosophers had a council of experts in these matters that had the responsibility to watch over both religion and education in Athens and would hear such claims and make a decision regarding the worthiness of what was being advocated. The group was commonly referred as the Areopagus because they met at a place of that name which is generally translated as Ares hill or Mars hill. According to their mythology, this was the place where Ares (Mars) was put on trial for killing the son of Poseidon for abusing Ares' daughter.

### Recognize God's Sovereignty – 17:22-26

<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the 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, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. <sup>26</sup> And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, Acts 17:22–26 (ESV)

Paul had already presented the Gospel in Athens to both Jews and devout Greeks in the synagogue and to anyone who would listen in the marketplace (agora) or the public forum. In his discourse to the Areopagites Paul was not presenting the gospel but was defending the charge against him that he was advocating the worship of some new deities named Iesus and Anatisis. Their conclusion that Paul was talking about "divine beings" would not be too surprising since they had an altar for Mercy, another for Shame, another for Fame, and another for Desire.

It is unlikely that Paul used words that might be interpreted as accusing the Athenians of being "superstitious" since that would have been insulting to them. He was essentially saying that they were the most devoted and respectful to things of a divine nature of any group that Paul had encountered. Paul knew that if we want to have someone give consideration to the message of the Gospel that we should not start out by putting them on the defensive.

Following this same idea of not shutting down communication by insulting them, Paul was careful to not accuse them of being ignorant about anything other than what they had already realized that they did not know. The Athenians believed themselves to be the most enlightened people in the world. However, they did admit the possibility that there might be something that was yet to be discovered such as another "divine being." That is why they had an altar to "an unknown god." This was another point about which he and they could find some commonality.

In order to know the unknown, one has to have additional information that comes from outside of our own being or the realm of our own ideas. In other words, we need to have a "revelation." Knowledge and truth are more than what mankind knows in and of himself. God is the source of real truth and knowledge. In the First Advent Jesus revealed to mankind the most complete revelation of God and His Godliness. Jesus came to us as God, the Son. God became a man and revealed to us the full nature of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Those who were listening to Paul were convinced that "reality" could be characterized by (1) an impersonal universe, (2) an impersonal fate, (3) an essential purposelessness, and (4) no hope for relationship with a faithful deity. To make the task even more difficult, part of the group he was addressing had a mindset that they were, above all else, to "enjoy life" and the other part had a mindset that they were to "endure life."

Paul took a four-pronged approach in “revealing” or making known to them the one True God. Paul addressed the greatness, the goodness, the government, and the grace of God. Much of this new information was contrary to their beliefs about reality.

Paul presented the truth about God that refuted most of the tenets of the Epicurean and Stoic beliefs as well as the religious practices of the pagan world. The first challenge to the popular beliefs of the Epicureans and Stoics was that there was a “beginning.” This was counter to their ideas that “matter” (random atoms, the void, and movement) was always in existence and “things” just came together. If there was a beginning, then there needed to be an Initiator or Creator. They did not ascribe to the idea that “if there is a clock, then the very existence of that clock demands that there was a clockmaker.” The belief of the Epicureans was that the spiritual or divine realm did not exist and the belief of the Stoics was that the realm of the cosmos was divine. Both ideas were refuted by Paul’s assertion that God created it all and was “transcendent” to the creation. In other words, God is not Nature but is apart from it and greater than creation.

It should then logically follow that this “greater than creation God” would be the Lord (ruler and master) of His creation. Since He was before the creation, He has no need for a temple which could only be built after the creation. In fact, He has no need to receive anything from that which He created. He is, instead, the Provider that gives His creation everything it needs not only for its existence but also for its continuance as expressed as “life and breath and all things.” In this “Providence” He shows His greatness and His goodness.

Paul’s statement that God had made every nation from one man (which we would say is Adam) was contrary to the Greek belief that some people groups (such as the barbarians) were inferior to them and were made of other “clay” than they were. The statement that God cared for all the nations denied their ideas that each nation had its own patron gods and that the wars of nations were actually the wars of their gods.

### Know Him – 17:27-29

<sup>27</sup> that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually 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 are indeed his offspring.’ <sup>29</sup> Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. Acts 17:27–29 (ESV)

Instead of the idea that life and events were purposeless, Paul told them that the divine purpose in everything was to cause all men to seek to know this Creator God. The Stoics would identify with this idea since they taught that Nature (as God) used everything for an eventual good result for the universe. The Stoics would have had no problem with the first part of Romans 8:28 that “all things work together for good.” However, as we know, Paul limited that truth to “those who love the Lord and are those who are called according to His purpose.”

The concept that God provides His providential guidance of all nations in regard to their place in the world and the events of their history addresses the “government” of God while the hope for a personal relationship with God is expressed in the idea that we are the “children of God” which might be interpreted to say that we are made in His image.

Paul quoted from one of the Greek poets that made this exact claim decades before then and then used this belief to show how ridiculous it was to try to have statues and idols that people worshiped since they wound up worshiping and honoring what they had made rather than the One who created and gave life to them. All heathen worship reverses the parts of God and man, and loses sight of the fact that He is continually the Giver of everything. True worship is

expressed less in our giving to, but more so in thankfully accepting from and using for, Him, all the many gifts that He provided to us.

### Repent and Believe – 17:30-34

<sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” <sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. Acts 17:30–34 (ESV)

Paul touched upon the grace of God in tolerating what people were doing when they did “not know” the truth. However, now that the “truth” was being made known to all the world, the situation had now changed: God was calling all people to repent. This call to repent started with the Jews first and was the message of John the Baptist and the call was now going out to all the world. The importance of this is found in the fact that there is an appointed time of judgment coming upon all the world and the Judge will be the One through Whom this revelation of Truth was given.

This whole idea of having to learn a new truth and to be concerned about requirements of a divine being and the accountability implied by a time of judgment was totally antithetical to the Epicureans. That information really would have been politically incorrect and would not be allowed in their “safe spaces” of concepts. This would be most upsetting to their “not wanting to be perturbed” by needing to consider such ideas.

The Stoics would have had a lot of trouble with the idea that Judgment would be done by a Man appointed by the Supreme Deity. From the text recorded by Luke, Paul did not tell them that God became a Man and it was this Man who would be appointed to be the Judge. Paul did mention that the authentication that “this Man was authorized to be the Judge” was His being raised from death. What is glaringly absent from this presentation was any mention of the need for atonement, the need for a perfect sacrifice, the claim of a sinless life lived by Jesus and the crucifixion in which God Who became a Man died for humanity.

It is probable that those who showed the most aggressive opposition were the Epicureans and those who wanted to hear more were the Stoics. The Epicureans and the Sadducees held similar beliefs and those of their ilk are still around today in the Secular Humanists. The Stoics, on the other hand were more in line with the ideas of a moral order of the universe and the ideas of helping others that we see advocated as acceptable behavior expected for Christians that we find in the writings of Paul, Peter and James. We might say that the Stoics were morally sensitive and would have embraced the practices of the Church. Their understanding of God and His nature as revealed in Creation, in the writings of the Old Testament and especially in the Life of Christ was not well developed but some certainly were open to this revelation.

The answer to the question of whether or not Paul was successful in his foray into the Greek intellectual world where he was perhaps attempting to be “all things to all men” is still being debated. One could certainly argue that it was successful for the few who did believe and were saved. Most of these philosophers did not accept Paul’s message. We learn from Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth that he had decided that when he proclaimed the message of God’s salvation in Corinth that he would adhere to the basics of Christ and Him crucified.