

What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts What If We Spoke Up?

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If We Spoke Up?

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text: Acts 17:1-34

Introduction

Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. The capital of Macedonia, a Jesus-friendly synagogue, and the famous center of philosophy in the ancient world. These next three missions upped the ante for intellectual prowess on the part of Paul and his traveling companions. Or so it would seem. The Christian missionaries drove deeper into the heart of educated Greece until at last they would arrive in Athens itself, home to the three great philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The history of human thought found in these places would both shape and challenge the Jesus message as it spread. Would the Christian Gospel be overwhelmed or vindicated by its engagement with the classical ancient world? Did the preachers of the Gospel appear intimidated or even silenced by the stature of this Greek intellectual capital? Would they fail to speak up?

We cannot help but recall the impressions left by the earliest apostles in Jerusalem: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were **unschooled, ordinary men**, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). By contrast Paul himself brought impressive credentials, schooled classically in Tarsus and then at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel. It's not hard to conclude that God had the Greek world in mind when he sent Paul to engage it on its own ground, in its own language and through the eyes of its own thinkers. Yet, with the weight of his learning, Paul humbly confessed regarding the Gospel: "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness'" (1 Corinthians 3:19); "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5); "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

The Gospel's success did not depend on the judiciousness of Paul's philosophical cleverness. However, his use of philosophical language gained him entrance wherever he went. Many of these Greek cities prided themselves on the contributions made by their famous thinkers. They saw themselves possessed by a special "wisdom" and treasured their roles in transmitting it to future generations. It was their legacy. Paul did not despise these differences, but found ways to *contextualize* the Gospel in each case.

Outline

1. Mission: Thessalonica (17:1-9)
2. Mission: Berea (17:10-15)
3. Mission: Athens (17:16-34)

Mission: Thessalonica (17:1-9)

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. 5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. 6 And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,

7 and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." 8 And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. 9 And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go (Acts 17:1-9).

Reading about Amphipolis and Apollonia reminds us about the great and important highway known as Via Egnatia which extended southward from Neapolis, passed through Philippi, then into these two cities, and finally brought its travelers to Thessalonica. From there it turned westward crossing Macedonia to the Adriatic coast at the port of Dyrrachium. Here passengers could book passage to Italy. Paul traveled this remarkable road from Philippi to Amphipolis (33 miles), Apollonia (27 miles), before coming to Thessalonica (35 miles) the site of his next visit. No evangelistic activity took place in the aforementioned towns which, as a matter of fact like Philippi, had no synagogues. The apostle had his eye on the capital of Macedonia and its chief city, Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a port city (now called "Salonica" or "Thessaloniki") founded by the Macedonian General Kassander after his successful campaigns against the Persians (315 B.C.E.). New wealth poured into Macedonia as a consequence and allowed new settlements. This port was constructed on the Thermaic Gulf and connected 26 villages as the main seaport and naval base of Macedonia. The original villages were Doric settlements of the period of Macedonian kings. The new city was named after his wife (Thessalonikē, daughter of Philip II and half sister of Alexander the Great).

As the successor of Alexander the Great, Kassander had considerable resources. He erected a massive wall around the city. The position of the city only improved with the completion of the "Egnatian Way" which made the port easily accessible to other Macedonian cities. Mentioned above, this highway ran through the city and can still be seen today. Strabo the geographer-historian in his *Geographic Elements* referred to the port as the "Metropolis of Macedonia".

The Celts attacked the city and smashed many of the defenses and walls but were turned back by the defenders of the town. Even the Romans were repelled in their early advances, but the city was surrendered after Perseus, King of Macedonia, was defeated in 168 BCE. Under the Roman Empire, Thessalonica became the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. The city was referred to as the "Mother of Macedonia" in Roman writings. The orator Cicero stayed here and delivered speeches. During the Roman Civil War (49-31 B.C.E.) Thessalonica backed Antony and Octavian who both stayed in Thessalonica after their victory. Later, the "Gate of Axios" (arch) was erected to commemorate victory at the Battle of Philippi (42 BCE). Octavian declared Thessalonica a "free city" under official known as *Politarchs* or "Magistrates."

When the Romans created it as a free city in 42 B.C.E., they granted it Greek-style government.¹ We have evidence of a synagogue and sufficient Jewish population to support it. Additional evidence places a *Samaritan* synagogue in it as well.² Paul makes his customary visit to the Jewish synagogue on three successive Sabbaths, presumably before trouble starts to brew against him. If we compare this text with Paul's later letter to the Philippians (4:16) and to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:9), his stay may have been longer, requiring him "to work with his hands," no doubt plying his tent-making trade. During this period, Luke tells us, Paul "reasoned" with his audience from the Scriptures. The Greek word for this activity is *dialegomai*, a term having a common root with *dialectic*, that form of discourse practiced in Hellenistic cities. It usually involved the posing and answering of questions (Compare Socrates and his method).

Two specific words described *how* Paul conducted his dialectic of the Scriptures:

1. "Explaining." The Greek term is *dianoigōn* from the verb which means "to open" and appeared in the writings of Plato, having the inferred meaning of "explain." When applied to human minds (or hearts), the term suggests "to cause open-mindedness," presumably by removing impediments to accepting new ideas.

¹ A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Oxford, 1963, pp. 95-98.

² Alan Crown, ed., *The Samaritans*, Tübingen, 1989, p. 211.

Certainly in Paul's case, he was telling the old Jewish story about Israel's God but with a fresh angle on it. This required not only the opening of the Scriptures but also the opening of hearts to accept this interpretation of them. Luke applied this word to what Jesus did after his resurrection when he showed his followers how the Old Testament found fulfillment in himself (Luke 24:26ff). It is also interesting to note that this verb can mean "to open the womb" (see Luke 2:23), but also "to open eyes, ears, etc" (Luke 7:34-35). As the translation of the Hebrew verb *pahah*, this "opening" might require the action of dividing or drawing apart, suggesting additional effort or difficulty in producing the desired result. Considering that Paul spent three Sabbaths engaged in his task (and perhaps longer), the task must have been a demanding one. It is remarkable that Paul manages to achieve *three* Sabbaths before opposition takes place! Usually one Sabbath is sufficient for word to spread and his opponents to line up for a skirmish!

2. "Proving." This is a translation of the Greek word *paratithēmi* which has the basic meaning of simply "to give" something. When occurring in the middle voice, as in this case, it acquires the sense of "to explain" or "to deposit," "to put in the charge of," a connotation derived from the literal nuance of the middle voice: "to give of itself." Paul's goal of *explaining* the Scriptures was that they might become self-evident in their application to Jesus.

The hardest idea for Jews to accept about Jesus was that he needed to suffer in his role as Christ, that is, as Messiah. Failed Messiahs littered the landscape of the first century during which Paul lived. And, as we have noted in the past, crucified Messiahs were, in fact, failed ones. The shame of the cross was a *stumbling block* to Jewish acceptance of Jesus, as expressed in the Greek word *skandalon* (see 1 Corinthians 1:23). Believing in the resurrection of the dead, at "end of days," was more easily accepted, to be sure. But the Gospel seamlessly joined the suffering and death of Jesus with his resurrection, yielding a wholly unexpected combination — at least in light of popular Jewish understandings of the Messiah. Yet, as Paul has insisted all along, it is precisely this combination which the Hebrew Scriptures foretold and which has become the "power of God" and the "wisdom of God" to both Jew and Gentile (see 1 Corinthians 1:24).

Therefore, Paul needed to spend sufficient time explaining all of this to his audience. And, as Marshall points out, he no doubt included in his key texts the following ones: Psalm 2, 16, 110; Isaiah 53 and Deuteronomy 21:23).³ The outcome was favorable, as Luke lists the variety of converts: Jews, Gentile God-fearers, and women. Of this latter group, he writes that they were *gunaikōn te tōn prōtōn ouk oligai*, that is, "women of the first-class, not a few." The pattern of upper-class women among the God-fearing, non-Jewish population supporting the Gospel persists in the book of *Acts*. Although the Christian community is urged to be cautious about catering to the "rich" (see James 2 and 5), we cannot underestimate the strategic importance, recognized by Paul (and others), in having such persons within the growing Jesus-congregations. If Paul would later write "not *many noble* are called" by the Gospel (1 Corinthians 1:26), his statement did not mean "not *any noble*" — a fact for which women like Lydia (Acts 16) were no doubt grateful!

Using language consistent with the formation of a separate community in Thessalonica, Luke tells us that these converts "joined Paul and Silas." The Greek word for "joined" is *prosklēroomai* which means "to be attached to," "to keep company," but also "to be allotted by," having God as the agent or cause. We might argue that a Messianic synagogue takes shape under the leadership of Paul and Silas, and which met in the "house of Jason" (17:5). At this point, there is no evidence of opposition, but the Gentile converts, being uncircumcised, would have difficulty remaining connected to an observant synagogue community, though not for want of trying.

However, opposition finally arises, as 17:5 documents. Once more "jealousy" of the religious sort sows seeds of discord, as the Jewish leadership incites the faceless mob by taking aside some "evil ones" (Greek: *ponēroi*) and planting them in the marketplace (*agora*) where they could "make the crowd worried." Luke is careful in his selection of words, showing insight into how crowd psychology works and how to maintain a degree of anonymity when inciting a riot. Obviously the Jewish leaders need to be careful: they are, after all, living in a

³ Marshall, *Acts*, p.277.

"free city" of the Greeks and cannot rely on the presence of Roman officials to execute formal charges against Paul and Silas. Not finding Paul and Silas at Jason's house, the "plants" decide to drag out the "locals" who follow Paul, bringing them before the authorities whom Luke refers to with the Greek word *politarchēs*. This is an accurate word choice which refers to non-Roman officials of a free Greek city.⁴ According to 17:6, the actual charge includes a narrative comment that "these men" have been throughout the "known world" stirring up trouble much like outcasts or vagabonds —fugitives, perhaps. The Greek, sometimes translated "turn upside down," would better be rendered as "driven from one's abode, outcast, or roused up from one's situation; to stir up, excite, unsettle; to excite tumults and seditions in the State; to upset, unsettle, minds by disseminating religious error." The implication seems to be that Jason and "the brothers are harboring persons who are, in fact, fugitives and enemies of the State."

This charge becomes amplified in 17:7 through adding two additional inflammatory claims:

1. "They are all acting against the decrees of Caesar." In a useful study, E.A. Judge argues that Paul's preaching that Jesus is the Messiah had intrinsic "kingly" overtones which might well have provoked alarm in the minds of the magistrates in Thessalonica. Paul might have actually been "predicting a change of ruler," something ordinarily done only by those authorized by the Empire to make such an announcement. Rome had rules against unauthorized proclamations, especially if they undermined loyalty oaths to Caesar himself.⁵
2. "[by] saying there is another king, Jesus." Calling the Emperor a *basileus* ("king") was common in the East where the context might actually lead to the translation, "There is another Emperor, Jesus." Of course, a similar charge was brought against Jesus himself when he stood before Pilate (Luke 23:2 and John 19:12). We have argued in earlier studies that the very use of the word *kurios*, "Lord," when speaking about Jesus ("Lord Jesus") had implied *subversive* overtones. Though the rabble could not prove this accusation, its very intimation was enough to engage the gears of the justice system. Even "free cities" needed to respect the Caesar.

The net effect of the instigators was a city in turmoil, and Luke phrases it with the verb *tarassō*. This word has various applications:

1. To a society: "to stir up, trouble, put into anarchy."
2. To a mind: "to confuse, confound, agitate, disturb, disquiet."
3. To an army: "to throw into disorder."
4. To a horseman: "to unseat."

However, the *politarchēs*, showing more temperate sentiments, accepted the equivalent of "bail" and allowed Jason and those with him to be released from detention. The Greek phrase *lambanein to hikanon* is roughly the same as the Latin *satis accipere* or *satis dare*, "to go/do bail." We'd probably say, "make bail." Ramsay thinks more might be intended, and that Jason was expected to do something as a condition of his bail or perhaps as the bail itself. What then? Jason was, on this reading, suppose to guarantee that Paul and Silas left town, thereby removing the reason for the disturbance.⁶ And in the very next verse (17:10) we are told that "the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea..." and did so "during the night." The verb *ekpempō* implies not merely the action of "sending away," but also that it happens for some purpose. Perhaps, as Ramsay suggests, the departure fulfilled the special bond arrangements as well as ensured the safety of Paul and his companions.

Some time after Paul's European missions, he penned two letters to the Christians in Thessalonica. They are contained in the New Testament books, 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians. We learn a great deal about the

⁴ This title appears in nineteen inscriptions, starting with the 2nd century B.C.E. through the 3rd century C.E. and was applied to Macedonian officials, including five specifically regarding Thessalonica which had five or six of them. See Bruce, pp. 326-327; also, E.D Burton in *Anglican Journal of Theology*, ii (1898), pp. 598 ff.

⁵ E.A. Judge, "The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica," *Reformed Theological Review*, 30, 1971, pp. 1-7.

⁶ Ramsay, *Paul Traveller*, p. 231.

church Paul and Silas founded as we carefully read these letters. Before moving on to Paul's next destination, it would behoove us to briefly summarize his reflections on the Thessalonian mission:

1. Fond memories of the people whom Paul describes as persons of faith, love and hope, known for their work, labor and endurance (1 Thessalonians 1:3).
2. The Gospel came to Thessalonica not only with *words* but also with *power* (1:5).
3. The Thessalonians followed the example of Paul through severe suffering and thereby became a model to all the believers in Greece (1:6-7).
4. The witness of the Thessalonians "rang out" everywhere (1:8), giving evidence of a complete break with their pagan ways and waiting for the royal arrival of King Jesus (1:9-10).
5. Paul did not see his visit to Thessalonica as a failure, though it was marked by opposition (2:1-2).
6. Paul characterized his relationship with the Thessalonians as a father to his children (2:7, 11).
7. The Thessalonians received the Gospel not as a human message, but as a message from God Himself (2:13).
8. They imitated the Christian community in Judea, including suffering at the hands of their fellow Jews (2:14).
9. Paul recalls how the Jews "drove" him out (2:15) because they wanted to deny access to the Gentiles within the believing community (2:16a).
10. Apparently judgment has fallen on those who obstructed the Gospel, perhaps because the local magistrates discovered their plot and punished them because of it (2:16b).
11. Paul saw his abrupt departure as a "tearing away" but only for a "short time." However, until the writing of the letter, a return visit has been prevented because of Satan's intervention (2:17-18).
12. Consistent with what Luke tells us in Acts 17:14, Timothy becomes Paul's surrogate in both Berea and in Thessalonica (3:1-5).
13. Timothy, on a recent visit to Thessalonica, brought back good news about the progress of the Gospel there (3:6-10).

Mission: Berea (17:10-15)

10 The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. 12 Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. 13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. 14 Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed (Acts 17:10-15).

Traveling some 45 miles southwest of Thessalonica, Paul and Silas arrive in the city of Berea, identified with modern-day Verria. The city of Berea was founded in the Archaic Period. Ruins extend to 700 B.C.E. (though scarce), when the city probably began as an agricultural market center. The founders were no doubt Thracians and Phrygians driven out by the Makadne. The mythological beginning of the city is ascribed to a daughter of Ocean, the Titan that married Thetys (another Titan) and bore the "Oceanids" (Nymphs of the great rivers). The myth probably recalls the primary reason the city was founded on this location. The city is set on a ridge with the well watered nearby basins of the Eliakomon and Axios Rivers. The alluvial plains north of Mount Vermio were rich in apple, peach and pear orchards. Scholars believe the city's population may have reached 60,000 to 70,000 at its zenith (about twice its modern population), but this is speculation. Extensive excavations have not been attempted in the area. The major artifacts in the local museum are mainly funerary monuments. A few sections of the ancient city wall are displayed on the edges of the city. With few physical finds, scholars are left to seek information from ancient historians. Thucydides referred to the place. The city opened its gates to Rome after the Battle of Pydna (168 B.C.E.) and was taken by the Romans without resistance. Under the Roman administration, the city became well populated, partly due to the extension of the Via Egnatia through the region of Berea to its north.

To this meager cache of information we now add the warm account given us by Luke. Returning to the synagogue, Paul finds a ready and receptive audience. The text uses the word "noble" from the Greek *eugenēs* which customarily marked persons of noble *birth*. Our English word "eugenics" derives from this root and refers to those means for *improving a species*. Presumably, the Greeks saw some persons as sufficiently improved to warrant being called by this name! Ironically, Judaism of the Second Temple period relied heavily on ethnic identity, and saw itself as God's true nobility by being "offspring of Abraham." The mob behavior in Thessalonica, incited by the scheming of the Jewish leadership, revealed something quite less than noble! Only by hiding behind the mask of the rabble ("evil fellows") could they retain the appearance of nobility. Paul knew better, as our brief summary of 1 Thessalonians revealed.

By contrast, the Bereans "were more noble than those in Thessalonica..." Luke is not minimizing the true believers in Thessalonica by saying this, but he is offering a sober assessment of the Jewish *leadership* in that city whose shenanigans led to Paul's abrupt departure and "short visit." Apparently, the Bereans nurtured no intrinsic hostility to Paul's message but showed "noble" qualities in judiciously examining all of the claims Paul made about Jesus, using the Scriptures as their touchstone. Two distinct actions receive special attention:

1. "They received the word with all eagerness." When a person opens their heart to the Gospel, this is the sort of language we find in the New Testament to describe that action. Recall Jesus' parable of the "sower" in which the "word" is seed planted on various kinds of soil, some of which produces fruitful plants, while others yield nothing (see Luke 8). Luke uses the Greek word *prothumia* to describe this receptivity: "readiness, eagerness, willingness, zeal, desire, good-will." As the literal components of this word suggest (*pro + thumia*), this is a predisposition of heart in openness to something. Paul uses the word in 2 Corinthians in the context of persons "willing (and eager) to give" to others (8:11, 19; 9:2). In this word we also have the idea of "unwavering devotion" — a strong commitment *to* something.⁷ The study of Scripture requires such commitment, and demands of us a new habit of the heart. It is a spiritual discipline without which we cannot grow as Christians.
2. "They searched the Scriptures daily whether these things might be so." In practical terms, the Bereans *did something to show their devotion*. The Greek word translated as "searched" is *anakrinō* and has roots in the classical Greek period where it means "to examine closely, question, interrogate, inquire into, dispute." The noun form is *anakrasis* and refers to the examination of parties concerned in a suit at law or to the preparation of the matter for trial. In each case, there is a "sifting process" where many details are gone over and examined carefully. Thus, it is used of pre-trial discovery as well as the presenting and examining of all evidence during the trial itself. Luke's choice of this word suggests that the Bereans were still in the process of examining the evidence presented by Paul from the Old Testament. They did not simply accept the material uncritically, but, in their devotion to finding the truth, subjected that material to the closest of scrutiny. Such conduct revealed the seriousness of their efforts and that the matter of Jesus-being-the-Christ was of such gravity that it warranted the care with which they approached the investigation. Luke implies by his assessment that the Christian church was not looking for "easy converts" in their evangelistic efforts but for "honest commitments" instead.

"Daily" points to the consistency with which the research was done. "Whether these things might be so" is a translation of a rare optative form in Greek. The gist of this clause is, "if these things might be held thusly." The word "held" is the simple *echō* which means "to have or hold." Luke implies that the Bereans looked for solid reasons for "holding fast" to the things which Paul taught them from the Scripture. We would do well to observe the patient study of the Bereans. For them, there were no short-cuts or easy answers. If the Gospel held eternal truth in its grasp, did it not stand to reason that anyone embracing it should carefully examine all its claims and only commit to it after being convinced that those claims held up?

⁷ In his discussion of Greek rule in the ancient world, John Moore Wickersham cites Euphemus in his description of Athenian devotion: "We furnished...the most unwavering devotion (*prothumia*)..." *Hegemony and Greek Historians*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1993, p. 59.

Acts 17:12 reveals the same audience response we have found elsewhere: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, respond to the message. Using the aorist tense of the verb *pisteuō* ("to believe"), Luke reports a *settled* faith on the part of the Bereans. But it was not to be an *undisturbed* faith. The network of Jewish opponents operated like clockwork, passing instructions down the ranks, taking its cue from Thessalonica, and using similar methods of crowd incitement to drive Paul from Berea. However, a strategic decision is reached by the freshly formed Christian community: allow Paul, the chief spokesman, to leave the city, but allow his companions (Silas and Timothy) to remain in Berea where they might work quietly at discipleship and leadership development. Recall Jesus' counsel to his apostles: "Be wise as serpents but harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). A little bit of both is operating in Berea.

An escort takes Paul to the coast where he uses the most direct transport to arrive in Athens, namely, ship, a journey which Luke narrates without incident.

The reader of our story probably wonders a bit about the chronology which links Paul to his most recent visits in Macedonia and to his future missions in Athens and Corinth. The following undated itinerary offers the chronology:⁸

1. Paul leaves Silas and Timothy in Berea, and goes to Athens. He sends them a message to join him at once (17:14f).
2. They rejoin him in Athens (1 Thessalonians 3:1).
3. Paul sends Timothy to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:1f) and Silas elsewhere in Macedonia (18:5) probably to Philippi, as Ramsay suggests.
4. He goes on to Corinth (18:1).
5. Silas and Timothy return from Macedonia to Corinth (18:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:6).
6. From Corinth he writes the two letters to the Thessalonians.

Mission: Athens (17:16-34)

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"- because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. 22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 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. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 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, 27 that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 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.' 29 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. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 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." 32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them (Acts 17:16-34).

Athens was the birthplace of democracy, and was its leader by the 5th century B.C.E., standing firm against the Persians. Though she lost to Sparta during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.), she recovered sufficiently to oppose Philip of Macedon (338 B.C.E.) and though unable to withstand his armies, won his respect and

⁸ Bruce, p. 330. See also K. Lake, *The Earliest Epistles of St. Paul*, London, 1911, p. 74.

retained her freedom. Even when Rome conquered Greece (146 B.C.E.), Athens was granted free city status within the Empire. Her respect came because of her arts, literature and philosophy. Among the famous philosophers of nature, she produced Anaxagoras, followed by the illustrious trio: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Later she would boast Epicurus and the Stoic Zeno. Nor should we fail to mention the importance of her language which remained prominent in its later dialect, *Koine*, in which the entire New Testament was written.

That said, Athens was an odd blend of superstition and enlightenment. It was once said of Athens that upon entering it, a person might more likely meet a god than a man,⁹ so filled was the city with statues of the various gods and goddess. The philosophers had not gone easy on such superstitions. Though they might make literary allusions to the Greek pantheon, they generally were suspicious of both the existence and character of the deities. Anaxagoras speculated that the sun was not a god but a burning rock, and for this, he was thrown out of Athens. Socrates, during his trial, was accused of atheism because he took a different stance on the existence and nature of *theoi* — gods or powers. In one of his dialogues, Plato recounted the discourse of Socrates in which he posed the question: "Is something Good because the gods judge that it is, or do the gods judge that something is Good because it simply is?" The conclusion of the dialectic turned out to be: things are Good because of the nature of things, and even the gods must acknowledge this independent standard of what is Good. Some philosophers sneered that the gods were no better morally than human beings, and sometimes were even worse.

Belief in many gods — polytheism — had its innate difficulties, among them the sheer confusion and conflict of having to deal with *so many gods!* Philosophers taught people to abandon the mytho-poetic way of looking at the world and to start examining things through careful thought. Where once a fanciful story about the gods would explain some occurrence in nature, now a law of nature was proposed instead. The earliest philosophers had a materialist basis for their ideas, and even the gods became creatures within the universe ruled by air, earth, fire and water. Still, to the average person, the tightly argued truths of philosophy failed to convince. Like children clinging to some fairy-tale past, people still preferred the stories of Hesiod and Homer to the syllogisms of Aristotle. At least some of them did.

Paul, entering Athens, met plenty of gods. And his deeply held views of the One true God Yahweh filled his heart with horror at what he saw in the city which boasted a venerable history of high ideals and profound truths. How could the city of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle still tolerate the wayward lives of the Greek gods and their female companions?

Deeper Background: A Short Philosophy Lesson

For some twenty years I taught philosophy and ethics to undergraduates as an adjunct at our local community college. During that time I had numerous occasions to explore Paul's visit to the city of Athens. The lesson plan called for a unit on Epicureans and Stoics, followed by Augustine. As I told my students, it was a crime to leap from Zeno (the Stoic) to the Christian Augustine and totally ignore the primary source materials in between. For me that meant exploring some aspect of the New Testament. I usually used the "gap" as an excuse to tell the Jesus story. Since Epicurus and Zeno were fresh on the students' minds, what better text to examine than Acts 17:16-34 which I printed out in full, titling it "Early Christianity Encounters Philosophy in Athens."

Knowing something about Greek thought is essential to understanding the New Testament world. The whole vocabulary of Greek ideas saturates the pages in the form of rhetoric, literary allusions and grammatical constructions. Nobody can do a decent job of translating the New Testament from Greek into English without consulting a lexicon or digging up the cultural setting of specific words. Since Luke wrote the most elegant Greek of any New Testament author (perhaps *Hebrews* is the other example), we are not surprised to find him using his skill to tell the story of Paul in the city of Athens. Nor should we short-change Paul himself who

⁹ This caricature is attributed to Petronius in his *Satiricon* 17.

received a decent classical education in Tarsus before taking up rabbinic studies in Jerusalem. As we shall soon see, he could handily converse in the language of the Athenians, relate sound bites from their poets and then challenge them to consider fresh new ideas — such as "Jesus and the resurrection."

What I want to do in this side-bar section is to offer a mini-lecture on Greek thought as it impacted the thinking of Athens in Paul's day. Admittedly, this material comes from lectures given over a period of years and abridged — somewhat — for the benefit of these notes, although some of you might not think it's abridged at all!

The rise of Epicureanism and Stoicism (the front-and-center philosophies in Acts 17) followed a massively successful period of Greek expansion under Alexander the Great who welded city states into an Empire and then proceeded to disseminate the resulting culture throughout that Empire. That process was called "Hellenization," the idea is "Hellenism," and the resulting culture referred to as "Hellenistic." The root word "Hellen-" derives from the Greek word for all things *Greek*, just as the region of Greek cities and states was called "Hellas." But Alexander died and Greek power split into smaller regional kingdoms under his former generals. One consequence was a decline in Greek power and a degree of social chaos.

To the individual Greek, philosophy came to mean some form of personal salvation. Foremost was the search for happiness and the things it meant: serenity and peace. There was a natural tendency to withdraw from the larger social unit (Empire) into communities of family and friends. The best example of this shift was a school of thought known as Epicureanism, named after its founder, Epicurus.

*Epicureanism*¹⁰

Epicurus lived during the last half of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd centuries (342-270 B.C.E.) and his school of philosophy thrived in Athens around 300. This school was called simply, "The Garden," where it met. Epicureanism is wrongly associated with excessive pleasure, especially of food. More accurately, it would be better to talk about the "discriminating pleasures," those arrived at by reasonable judgments. The heart of this philosophy was the idea that human nature judges goodness by *pleasure* and evil by *pain*. It was not only the intensity of the pleasure but its duration which mattered; not only physical pleasures, but all mental ones as well. Even before Epicurus, one of Socrates' pupils, Aristippus (435-356 B.C.E.), had advanced a similar idea in what has been called Cyrenaic philosophy (he was from Cyrene in north Africa).

The goal of the "good life" was captured in the Greek word *ataraxia*, roughly translated as "serenity," the absence of agitation. Such a life required the practice of philosophy — not just its theories but also its application to real life. Epicurus focused on the causes of *taraxia* — agitation and internal turmoil. Among the major ones was 1) fear of death, and 2) fear of the gods. Such fears were rooted in ignorance or false ideas about the nature of the world. To overcome these fears, we need a solid and accurate account of the physical world — that is, we need *science*.

Relying on the physical science taught by Democritus (460-370 B.C.E.), a nature philosopher, Epicurus served up his view of the world through the theory of atoms, motion, void and chance. Using this theory, he tried to

¹⁰Epicurus was a voluminous writer, but almost none of his own work survives. Diogenes Laertius, who probably lived in the third century CE, wrote a 10-book *Lives of the Philosophers*, which includes three letters by Epicurus. These three letters are brief summaries of major areas of his philosophy: the *Letter to Herodotus*, which summarizes his metaphysics, the *Letter to Pythocles*, which gives atomic explanations for meteorological phenomena, and the *Letter to Menoeceus*, which summarizes his ethics. It also includes the *Principal Doctrines*, 40 sayings which deal mainly with ethical matters. Because of the absence of Epicurus' own writings, we have to rely on later writers to reconstruct Epicurus' thought. Two of our most important sources are the Roman poet Lucretius (c. 94-55 BCE) and the Roman politician Cicero (106-43 BCE). Lucretius was an Epicurean who wrote *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), a six-book poem expounding Epicurus' metaphysics. Cicero was an adherent of the skeptical academy, who wrote a series of works setting forth the major philosophical systems of his day, including Epicureanism. Another major source is the essayist Plutarch (c. 50-120 CE), a Platonist. However, both Cicero and Plutarch were very hostile toward Epicureanism, so they must be used with care, since they often are less than charitable toward Epicurus, and may skew his views to serve their own purposes.

show how death is not to be feared, the gods are not a threat, and we have true freedom to choose and act. At the heart of his remedy for fear is his belief that the universe runs by natural causes which can be known by us. This knowledge frees us from the fears which are due to ignorance and superstition.

What did this physical theory look like, and what are its implications for our view of *death*? Simply put, 1) all things are material; 2) all things are eternal; 3) all things are uniform. Specifically, all things are made of material *atoms*, the ultimate form which matter assumes. All other things are atomic compounds — combinations of these atoms. Whatever we call change or destruction is nothing more than the rearrangement of these atoms. Moreover, the things we see do not look like the atoms from which those things are made. The actual form of things we see is due to the motion of atoms in empty space called the *void*. What form did that motion take? 1) Collisions; 2) Separations; 3) Swerves. This motion is eternal like the atoms themselves. The soul (mind), being a *thing*, is also a compound, made of material atoms, though they are very fine and distributed through the body. The body encases the soul, and is capable of sensations as a result of the soul/body connection. What is death? Nothing more than the failure of the body to continue its encasement of the soul which "escapes" and is dispersed into its constituent atoms at death. At death, therefore, all sensation ceases. Therefore, death, being the end of sensation, need not be feared, since *Death is Nothing*.

Formulating an early "Big Bang Theory" vis-à-vis Democritus, Epicureanism said that the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars) are made of fiery atoms. They do not influence human destiny: astrology is, therefore, false. It is false, then, to attribute "will" to the heavenly bodies, and believing such things leads to fear, pain and irrational emotions. A true science of nature frees us from the fear of planetary or stellar powers.

What of the gods? By definition, the word "god" refers to a being that is "immortal and blessed." The gods are not as human beings believe them to be. If the gods are immortal and blessed, then they know "no trouble nor cause trouble to others." They have an existence above and beyond human life. But, like everything else, they, too, are made from atoms — only these atoms are highly sophisticated. Since — as Epicureanism concluded above — there is no life after death and no one need to fear being judged by the gods. Moreover, in this life the gods do not meddle in human affairs. Therefore there is no point in praying to the gods: put simply, they just don't care about anything outside themselves.

Human beings seek immortality — to live forever, but do so is to think that *more time* is better than *less time*. However, that assumes *quantity* is more important than *quality*. Disagreeing with this, the Epicureans argued that the task of *ethics* was to make the most of *this life*. To do this, a person must choose pleasures carefully, often enduring some pain for better pleasure, or avoid some pleasures for lesser pain. The goal is to "the freedom of the body from pain and of the soul from confusion." The wise person seeks to minimize his desires (needs) by not allowing his imagination to create artificial needs and to desire what he cannot have, even as society tries to set up "vain desires." The human goal should be *independence* in all things. Nature makes necessary desires easy, but unnecessary desires difficult to obtain. Only through right understanding of pleasure/pain can the soul be "blessed." Pleasure is, after all, nature's way of helping human beings cope with pain which itself does not exist continuously.

Destiny or Fate is "not our mistress." Quite the contrary, *chance* is the best friend of human beings, living in a material world, who would want to control the course of their lives. Although Epicurus' theory of material things might seem to rule out free will at all — being highly deterministic — in point of fact, it had an "out," something called the "swerve." Atoms in motion do not follow straight predictable paths but, in fact, *curve* in their movements. It is just this unpredictable crooked path which allows the highly refined atoms which make up the human soul to escape the iron fist of fate. Consider the way we sometimes talk about choices: "Give me a *chance*!" means "Give me a *choice*!" Epicurus made it quite clear that we can only be responsible if we are free.

In matters of social ethics, Epicurus addressed the meaning of *justice*. Put concisely, justice is "A pledge of mutual advantage to restrain men from harming one another and save them from being harmed." Laws should be judged by this idea of "mutual advantage." States must be willing to change laws when circumstances change. The primary role of the state is to secure protection of its citizens. The primary object of the citizen is to secure friendship with his fellow-citizens. Government is good insofar as it make these two things possible. The goal of social ethics is the quiet life, often requiring retirement from public life.

The Good Life is the "blessed life." To achieve it, human beings must make an honest admission that death is coming, refuse to allow fate to take them captive, and reach the day of death filled with the satisfaction that they have ended their life better than when they began it. In that condition, Epicurus affirmed, human beings "live like a god among men."

Stoicism: Zeno

The earliest Stoic was Zeno (336-264 B.C.E.) who founded the "Painted Porch" (Greek: *Stoa Poikilē*) in Athens. His ideas influenced later Roman thinkers, and his philosophy became the most popular philosophy in the Roman Empire, having its widest appeal among the soldiers who admired its discipline and ability to endure hardship. Among Rome's famous Stoics were Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.), Seneca (4 B.C.E.-65 C.E.), Epictetus (60-117 C.E.) and Cicero (106-143 C.E.). Our knowledge of Stoicism is due to the teaching of Epictetus (55-135 C.E.) during the period 89-130 C.E. He was from Phrygia, a slave who eventually obtained his freedom, taught in Rome, was banished from there by Emperor Domitian (along with all philosophers), and ended up in Greece. His pupil, Arrian, wrote down his ideas and is our principal source of information about him in an eight-volume work known as the *Enchiridion* or *Handbook*. The general tenets of Stoicism are:

1. Live according to rational principles.
2. Achieve self-sufficiency.
3. Maintain discipline.
4. Be immune to life's reversals.

The Stoics were great admirers of Socrates, largely because of the way of faced death.

Believing in the order of the universe and its design, they largely followed the nature philosophy of the pre-Socratic Greek Heraclitus (500 B.C.E.). Their view of God included these ideas:

1. God is immanent in the world (*pantheism* or perhaps *panentheism*).¹¹
2. God is cosmic intelligence (soul of the world?).
3. Human beings are part of God.
4. The good life is being like God.
5. Human beings are a union of matter and divinity.
6. This combination makes ethical choice possible.

Ethical *virtue* is the condition of the will governed by reason. It has as its goal to seek "what is within my reach." Happiness invades human lives when they seek what is "outside my reach." And so, the key ethical question posed by the Stoics is simply, "What is within my power?" What I cannot control need not influence me badly. When I cannot control the event, I can still control my attitude about the event.

With respect to the world, the *kosmos*:

1. God governs the cosmos.
2. God created the cosmos.
3. We share in God's nature through reason.

¹¹ The difference between these two concepts is simple: pantheism says that "God is all and all is God," implying that God and Nature are the same thing; panentheism says that "God is *in* all," implying that God and the world are distinct beings, but that God is intimately related to the world and in continuous relationship with it. Of course, both are different from Deism which treats God as an absentee landlord to His own world.

4. All is done for the sake of the *Whole* — a big picture approach to reality.

5. Details derive their significance by being related to the total cosmos.

The human problem is that I cannot attend to all things at once. Fortunately, God placed himself inside us: we are not alone. We are, in fact, a distinct portion of the essence of God. God is not gold and silver idols. The way we live either honors or dishonors God.

Human beings are part of a commonwealth, and therefore are not isolated but citizens of the universe. Each person is like a hand or foot in the body of the cosmos, and should "hold no private interest" but act in "reference to the whole."

Regarding ethics:

1. We have many advantageous powers (sight, hearing, etc.), but we have been given a special ability in addition to these: to estimate the value of each power and pronounce on the value of each.
2. The seat of moral inquiry is not the senses but the will.
3. "Therefore in the will alone is vice: in the will alone is virtue."
4. The task of the will is to "render to each its due" — that is, the ability to assess the *excellence* of each thing in relationship to other things.
5. Freedom is to know what is in our power and what is not.

The relationship which ethics has with nature:

1. Determinism and change a part of nature and not within our power.
2. We must find the "role" assigned by nature and play it well.
3. Death is our common fate as human beings: I cannot escape death, but I can escape the dread of it. This was the primary position of the Stoics' role model, Socrates.

On the matter of pleasure and Goodness:

1. Pleasure is the effect of what is good, and not the same thing as the Good.
2. Some pleasures are not good, and from this fact arises the notion of *shame*.
3. The main question about pleasure: Can it deliver on what it promises?
4. The main obligation: Control passions so they won't control you.

When dealing with loss:

1. Ask the question: "What do I gain by what I lose?"
2. Our real gain: The preservation of character.
3. We are the pilots of our ship: guard it.
4. What do we get in exchange for selling our virtues?
5. How we view God: Being free means "to be a friend of God," and acknowledge that God always has good intentions in what he does.

Philosophy seeks wisdom, those ideas innate to us having to do with: good/evil, fair/base, proper/improper, happiness/misery. Our greatest challenge is how to apply these properly. Just as there is a rule for doing math, so with ethics. Pleasure cannot be the rule because it is too unstable. Philosophy helps us find the rules and make use of them.

Paul Reacts to Athens

Athens was the enduring center of philosophy for Greece and Rome, but it was also a city full of contradictions: where rational discourse (both Epicurean and Stoic) was surrounded by the symbols of pagan religion, and where sobriety of thought lived side-by-side with ancient superstition.

Into this city walks Paul the observant Jew and follower of Jesus. What he saw was no doubt known to him in theory: he was thoroughly acquainted with Hellenism and with paganism from his birthplace, Tarsus, which

bore the marks of both. Yet, finally standing in this famous notable city, with its rich heritage in Greek thought as far back as Anaxagoras, Paul shudders at the full effect of seeing and witnessing its culture encoded in stone and burnished in bronze.

Luke skillfully describes the apostle's emotional state, using the Greek word *paroxunomai* in the imperfect tense. This word is the basis for our English word paroxysm and has the meaning "to be provoked or upset at someone or something involving severe emotional concern." The classical usage grows out of the idea "to be sharp, to prick," which naturally leads "to be irritated." The source of Paul's irritation was seeing the city "full of idols." Of course, Paul affirmed the fundamental commandments of Torah which began with "no other gods" and "no graven image" (Exodus 20). Obviously Paul saw both in Athens. When the Old Testament forbade such images, it did so for several reasons:

1. Making images of God greatly *limits* the ways people might contemplate His majesty.
2. Images of God might, in fact, *distort* the true nature of His character.
3. Only one authorized image of God exists in His creation: human beings who are made "in the image of God," thus ruling out idols, the lifeless parodies.
4. In the realm of God, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God," and the authentic representation of God's character.
5. We become what we worship, and therefore the worship of images of stone rather than the living God results in lifeless and powerless human lives (see Romans 1:19ff for Paul's written treatment of this theme).

Paul knew all of this, and so seeing the panoply of stone gods pricked him deep within his soul. On the one hand, his Jewish faith screamed "idolatry!" while his sensible reason must have puzzled at the contradictions between the worship of idols and the claim to have philosophical wisdom. Philosophers had for generations criticized popular religion, reminding the Greeks that the gods were no better than the human beings who invented them. In some cases, the gods lived more immoral lives than the average human being, yet were elevated as supreme beings. Xenophanes who lived in the 6th century B.C.E. once remarked: "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things which are shameful and a reproach among humans: stealing and committing adultery and deceiving one another."¹²

For a time, Paul retires to the familiar surroundings of the Jewish synagogue where he encounters fellow Jews and God-fearers among the Greeks. Nothing is said about Jewish opposition to his teaching. Athens would not countenance the sort of "witch-hunt" launched against Paul by the Jews from other cities. Deeply embedded in Athenian history was the martyrdom of Socrates, a dark blot on its enlightened intellectual canvass. Paul would not join him in death — at least in Athens! Emboldened, Paul turns to the *agora*, the familiar Athenian marketplace, home not only to wares but also ideas. Here he "reasons" with "those who happened to be there." Luke uses the Greek verb *dialegomai*, the familiar root word for *dialectic*, the sort of disciplined conversation philosophers like Socrates had with their students (17:17).

The two dominant schools of thought in Athens (as we have noted in our extended discussion above) are identified as the Epicureans and Stoics who enter into "dispute" with Paul. The Greek verb in this case is *sumballō*, "to give careful consideration to various implications of an issue; to reflect on, to think about seriously, to think deeply about." Luke is quick to emphasize that two main issues dominate the conversation:

1. Paul is labeled as a *spermalogos*, that is, a person who picks up and drops off ideas much like a bird picks up seeds. Louw and Nida (27.19) comment: "The term is semantically complex in that it combines two quite distinct phases of activity: (1) the acquiring of information and (2) the passing on of such information. Because of the complex semantic structure of this word, it may be best in some languages to render it as 'one who learns lots of trivial things and wants to tell everyone about his knowledge,' but in most languages there is a perfectly appropriate idiom for 'a pseudo-intellectual who insists on spouting off.'" Allied with

¹² Fragment 11, translated by D.G. Rice and J.E. Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion*, Missoula, 1979, p. 31.

this meaning is the idea of "an information scavenger" or one who is unable to say anything worthwhile *for himself* because he is a mere collector of other people's ideas (17:18a).

No doubt Paul's Semitic background and the manner of his discourse struck the Athenians as simply odd, though he certainly did bring to them novel ideas! Since he did not identify himself as a member of a particular philosophical school, he probably struck them as a *layman* who dabbled in philosophical conversation. On the other hand, he seems to have intrigued them — they had difficulty putting him into any known category.

2. Paul is "accused" of being a "proclaimer" (Greek: *kataggeleus*) of "strange gods (*xenōn daimoniōn*). Specifically, they think he is introducing two new ones: *Iēsous* and *Anastasis*. In point of fact, he does offer a fresh view of God, but they misunderstand use his of language in this case. *Anastasis* is not the name of a female deity, but instead the Greek word for "resurrection," something Paul would obviously be preaching as part of his Gospel proclamation. It is interesting how a misunderstanding becomes the basis for a full-blown discussion of larger issues (17:18b) — ones which will soon bring Paul to the famous Areopagus.

A word of explanation about "introducing new gods" is needed at this juncture.¹³ In the ancient world, cities like Athens had their "approved lists" of deities — those which had been vetted by an approving body. Persons were free to "nominate" such new gods in an official setting, but that nomination required agreement and authorization. If we recall the trial of Socrates (399 B.C.E.), we know that on that occasion the famous philosopher was charged — among others things — with teaching foreign or strange gods, and ultimately with being an atheist, although this charge was greatly modified in due course. On Paul the Athenians place the burden of proof, and he is more than willing to carry it all the way to the famous council.

The word "Areopagus" literally means "Ares' Hill." Ares was the Greek god of war, counterpart to the Roman god Mars (sometimes this meeting place is called "Mars Hill" for that reason). Areopagus applies to both the *place* and the *people* who met there. As a hill, it overlooked the *agora* in the city of Athens. As the council, it served as the chief court, even into the first century when Paul was in Athens,¹⁴ and would meet either on the hill or somewhere northwest of the *agora*. We are not certain if Paul went to the hill or was simply summoned to meet with the council. It is also unclear if the proceedings were legal or merely discursive in nature. The term used to describe how the Athenians "brought" Paul to the session is the Greek word *epilambanomai* which means "to take, take hold of, seize, catch, or arrest." Luke uses the full range of meanings in his writings: 1) taking a child, which assumes gentleness (Luke 9:47); 2) taking a sick man for the purpose of healing him (Luke 14:4); 3) entrapment in a debate or a question (Luke 20:20, 26); 4) forcing Simon to carry the cross of Jesus (Luke 23:26); 5) owners of the slave girl seizing Paul and Silas (Acts 16:19); 6) seizing and beating someone (Acts 18:17); 7) seizing and arresting Paul in the Temple (21:30, 33); 8) take someone by the hand (Acts 23:19). As we can see, drawing conclusions from this word about what was intended in Paul's case is difficult.

It is likely that Paul is being invited to offer an explanation his teachings, perhaps more seriously to offer reasons for Athens to accept two new deities into their pantheon. Clearly, according to 17:19-21, the Athenians hear "new ideas," and this is the raw material for lively debate in such a city as Athens.

1. They want to know the "meaning" of Paul's words. Literally, "what these things wish (Greek: *thelō*)." This is an idiom for talking about the "meaning" or "intention" of an idea. Perhaps they are asking what Paul *intends* or *wants to achieve* by talking about these new ideas.
2. Bringing the new ideas is expressed with a verb which actually means "to entertain as a guest" (*xenizō*) That is, Paul is requesting that the Athenians "host" his ideas much like they might accommodate a guest

¹³ See B.W. Winter, "On Introducing Gods to Athens: An Alternative Reading of Acts 17.18-20." *Tyndale Bulletin* 47, no. 1 (1996), pp. 71-90. On Socrates' trial in this connection, see Plato's *Apology* 24B-24C, as well as Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, 1.1.1).

¹⁴ T.D. Barnes, "An Apostle on Trial," *Journal of Theological Studies* 20, 1969, pp. 407-419.

who was visiting their city. In effect, the Athenians are offering to show hospitality to those ideas by inviting Paul to explain them more completely.

3. Luke offers his own commentary on the intellectual proclivities of the Athenians. Though they might accuse Paul of being a "seed picker of ideas," they were hardly different in their curiosity about unusual ideas. Their preoccupation, Luke tells us, was to "speak" and to "hear" some "newer thing." He uses the comparative form of the adjective *kainos*, "new." Every "new" idea coming to town was deemed "newer" than the ideas which preceded it! Perhaps the Athenians had rules for judging whether this idea counted as equally "new" or actually "newer." Paul could hardly pass up the invitation. Did he not bring Good News? Was not his message about Jesus the bringer of the New Creation? What could be newer than these great proclamations?

What follows is Paul's formal address to the Athenians in which he will both satisfy their need for an explanation and issue a *bone fide* invitation for his hearers to respond to the Gospel. To do so he "stands up" in the midst (*en mesō*) of the council, and Luke spells this out with dramatic flair. Famous words come from Paul's lips: "Men of Athens!" (*Andres Athēnainoi*). Socrates spoke to his accusers, the council of 500, in much the same way. Luke is consciously casting Paul in the role of a new Socrates who advocates on behalf of Jesus and the Gospel.

Before examining certain aspects of this speech, we present a descriptive outline. Consistent with the techniques of rhetoricians like the famous Quintilian, Paul constructs an address with recognizable divisions.

1. Introduction (*exordium*), 17:22b-23a. Paul commends the shrewd religious practices of the Athenians, citing evidence from his inspection of their various statues and altars which led him to discover the altar to "the unknown god."
2. Thesis (*propositio*), 17:23b. Paul intends to proclaim the identity of the unknown god.
3. Narrative (*narratio*), 17:24-28. The focus of the "story" portion of Paul's speech is to tell the "story of God," what we might call the *meta-narrative* — the "big story."
4. Argument (*probatio*), 17:29-31. God is now commanding everyone to "repent" based on His remarkable act of raising Jesus from the dead, and this Jesus will one day judge the world.
5. Conclusion (*peroratio*), 17:32-34. Before Paul offers a proper summation, his audience begins to respond in three distinct ways: scoff, question, and accept.

Introduction (*exordium*), 17:22b-23a

The Greek word *deisidaimonesterous* is ambiguous, allowing two distinctly possible meanings: 1) excessively superstitious; 2) devoutly religious. A famous satirist of Greek religion, Theophrastus (370-285 B.C.E.), once penned a character sketch called "The Superstitious Man" (*deisidaimōn*) to poke fun at popular religious ideas. How might Paul's audience have filtered this reference? The Epicureans would have been delighted to hear Paul's *complaint* about the silliness of belief in the various deities. As we noted in our discussion of Epicurean philosophy (above), this school of thought critiqued the generally accepted view of the gods and replaced it with a more materialistic one, isolating the gods from human beings entirely. On the other hand, the Stoics might have heard Paul differently, attracted to his *compliment* of their "devotion," something they held in high esteem, though attributing it to a single god. So whether the word evoked a *complaint* or a *compliment*, it functioned cleverly as a way to *connect* with the Athenians who heard him.

Much has been written about "the altar to the *unknown god*." Presumably, altars to the approved deities of Athens were labeled with the respective names of the deities. Paul seems to suggest that the Athenians' construction of an altar with the inscription: *Agnōstō Theō* showed that they were quite thorough! Ironically, the inscription could be translated "To the Agnostic's God," implying not merely that the Athenians didn't know who this god might be, but that they freely confessed in their proliferation of so many other gods, they might have left one out! When in doubt, it's better to say, "I don't know!" We hear something of Socrates in this concession. For when the famous Oracle of Delphi declared Socrates to be the "wisest of men," Socrates did not accept that statement at face value, but devised a method for questioning it (the *dialectic*) and then

proceeded to look for a man wiser than himself. The net result of his quest was a fresh understanding of what the Oracle really meant, namely, that he is wisest who, *like Socrates*, in his knowing, knows that *he knows nothing*. An honest admission of ignorance is a far better stance than a false claim to knowledge, unsupported by argument or facts. Paul may well be picking up the spirit of this principle when he honors the honest ignorance embodied in the inscription.

"In effect," Paul tells his audience, "you are worshipping a being whose identity you do not know. Unlike the other gods whose stories you multiply without end, contained in the mythologies of Hesiod and Homer, this god is *utterly and uniquely different*. In your *knowing*, you admit that there exists at least one god who is unknown to you." Presumably such a god would have lacked a statue, something which the pagans in Athens would have noticed about Jewish worship in the synagogues. Recall how the Roman Pompey marveled that any people could worship their god without an image, leading him to peek inside the most holy place of the Temple when he finally arrived in Jerusalem, to see if the rumors of an imageless god were true.

Thesis (*propositio*), 17:23b

"I am going to proclaim to you the one you, being without knowledge (*agnoountes*), worship (from *eusebeō*)." Paul does not doubt that a deep-seated desire to worship the divine exists in the hearts of the Athenians. From the artifact of their altar, Paul honors them with what little devotion they offer to this unknown God. Agnosticism is not always the end of the road, but sometimes prepares a person for an honest embrace of the truth about God. It is better to reject belief in false gods, even if it means belief in no gods — or in this case, provisional belief in the existence of a god about whom one knows nothing. How often do we hear someone say, "There has to be *something* out there!" Better *something*, though unknown, than something-that-is-fiction.

The earlier charge that Paul proclaimed "new gods" is eagerly accepted by him. He takes up the challenge by saying, "I am going to *proclaim*..." using the same Greek root (*kataggellō*) the Athenians applied to him. The heart of Paul's preaching was the revelation of the one true God — the God of Israel now revealed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. This was, of course, the great undertaking of the Gospel: to make clear and distinct the true nature of God. What early Christian preaching tried to do was not prove that Jesus was God. Such an attempt would need to assume that people *already knew who God was* and that somehow Jesus matched up with that conception of God. But we are consistently told in the New Testament that people had distorted views of God: the Jews are told by Jesus that they don't know God (see John 8:55); Gentiles are charged with worshipping "vain things" (Acts 14:15). What was needed was a fresh, clear re-statement of the character of God, and that is why "the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us," namely, so that we might "see his glory...the glory of God" (John 1:14). So the real challenge facing the first century audience in Athens was not, "Is Jesus God?" but instead, "Is God Jesus." And to the challenge, Paul arises to speak.

Narrative (*narratio*), 17:24-28

The story Paul tells the Athenians is the old, old story of Israel's God, and Paul relishes telling it! In 17:24, he sounds a great deal like Jonah, addressing himself to the pagan crew of the storm-tossed ship bound for Tarshish (see Jonah 1:9) who up to that point had been crying out to their pagan gods with no success. Here, Paul sees the Epicureans and Stoics, whose philosophies he knows well, admitting their ignorance of at least one god whose altar stands in their midst. This One *is* (17:24-25):

1. "The God..." The Greek is concise, committed to monotheism and to *the unity of God*. Unlike the multifarious gods of the Greek/Roman pantheons, this God is utterly unique and entirely One. Such unity does not rule out His Trinity, but it does exclude any thought of competition, confusion or chaos as the Athenians might find in the lives of their popular gods and goddesses. Paul is hereby affirming the great *Shema* of the Hebrew faith (see Deuteronomy 6:4): "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is a Unity (Hebrew: *'ehād*)..." The plain assertion of Genesis 1:1 is written all over Paul's words to his audience: "In the beginning *the* God..." (*b^erōshîth bara ha'elohîm*).

2. "Who made the world and everything in it..." God is the Creator God, implying His logical separateness from the world He made. He is Himself not made of atoms, and so the Epicurean view of Him is wrong. He is Himself not the same as the world and so the Stoic view of Him is wrong as well. Allowing God to be the same as His world, either as matter or mind, undermines His supremacy over it. Curiously, the Hebrew thought forms don't talk about "the world" as much as they express the idea of "heaven and earth" or simply "the all" (see Jeremiah 10:16). This is distinctive teaching from the Hebrew Bible and can be found in several key passages (see Exod. 20:11; 31:17; 2 Kgs 19:15; 2 Chr. 2:12; Neh. 9:6; Psa. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6; Isa. 37:16; Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; Rev. 14:7; 18:1).
3. And "is Lord (*kurios*) of heaven and earth..." And this is the supremacy which Paul affirms when he uses the word *kurios* to speak of God's rule over his world. Notice how he unites that rule over heaven *and* earth. God is not aloof, like the Epicurean gods, "immortal and blessed," who are disinterested in worldly affairs. Instead, God is the King of Creation, who takes an active and vital interest in everything He has created. That is, Paul is describing Creation as belonging to the "kingdom of God," His active reign or rule over all He has made. Stoics would have resonated with the idea that God *rules the world*, because they imagined their world to be ordered and governed by *logos*, "word, law, mind," although they blurred the distinction between God and this world. Perhaps the most eloquent Old Testament expression of this is in Isaiah 66:1 which leads naturally into....
4. "and does not live in temples built by human hands..." This is largely about *containment* and *control*. Again, Isaiah 66:1. If heaven is God's throne and earth is God's footstool, then no humanly constructed sanctuary could ever "contain God." The argument against idols follows logically from the argument about God's vastness and rule. The very fact — underscored by Paul — that the Athenians had an altar to the "unknown god" revealed the high improbability that human objects of worship could ever fully comprehend this God, let alone *contain Him*. **God is always bigger than our idea of Him.** Thus, the fallacy of idol worship. If human hands make *something*, then human hands are the creators of that *something*. But...
5. "...he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything..." Any god worth his name must be beyond requiring human maintenance. We would live in a fragile world indeed if the gods required sustenance from human beings! If humans need to feed the gods, does that not bring into question who is really the one in charge of creation? Are the gods *that* "needy"?
6. "because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else..." Paul now argues the counterpoint. It is God who give life, breath and everything else *to human beings*. Put simply, God is the *Giver*: God is full of *grace*. Paul takes special pains to point out that God Himself (*autos*) *gives* (*didous*, present active participle — "keeps on giving"). The combination of the intensive form of "himself" and the present tense for "give" implies that God the Creator *remains in constant contact with His creatures, continuously supplying them with their very lives*. This is not the aloof ("immortal and blessed") god of the Epicureans, nor is it the impersonal *logos-law* of the Stoics, but the personal God who ever remains in relationship with the human beings he created. Moreover, Paul tells his audience, this "gift which keeps on giving" is for *all human beings*, not just *some* of them. Though Paul is fully aware that God chose Israel to be His proto-type people, he has also come to believe that restored Israel's present mission is to bring this message to the *whole world*. God's choice of Israel was not merely something He did *for Israel* but rather something He was doing *through Israel* for the whole human race.
7. "From one man he made every nation of men..." The Greek here is interesting: *ex henos pan ethnos anthrōpōn*, literally, "from one all ethnicity of human beings..." That is, God created a single human species, though diverse in its ethnicity and comprised of many human beings. Of course, if an Athenian actually believed the writings of Homer and Hesiod, he would know about the frequent conjugal intrusions of the gods and goddesses into the lives of human beings. Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great claimed that Zeus had impregnated her, contributing to a series of later claims that famous rulers were, in fact, "sons of the gods." Such events became for some human beings a reason to claim superiority, whether among persons or within ethnic groups. Paul denies this privilege, but declares the procreation of the *human race* as a unity.
8. "he determined the times set for them..." The sort of language Paul uses here implies our idea of Providence, God's work of "overseeing" the world he made, and in particular, the special place each ethnic

group has in His larger purpose. The Stoics would have connected with this idea, since they believed in special roles for individuals within the grander scheme of the world. Paul elevates this idea because of his view of God as a unity ("One God"): human beings belong to a single humanity though they possess a majestic diversity of race. "Who" a human being is and "where" they live belong to the overall Providence of God. Human history — including time and space — is not an accident, the result of the collisions of atoms, for example (as in Epicurean thought), but the thoughtful intention of God who made the world. The *unity of the human race* derives from *the unity of God*, as well as from the kindly mercies of God.

9. "God did this so that men would seek Him..." What God intended was that human beings might "seek" Him. Paul is careful with his grammar at this point: So that human beings might seek "**the** God" (*ton theon*). Notice the use of the definite article to "articulate" the singularity of God. That is, human beings, discerning the Providence of God in the careful ordering of human history, would *look for the One True God*, and not chase after *the many gods* of infamous Greek mythology. Paul argues that the flow of history and the situation of ethnic diversity within that history strongly points to One God, not many gods. The word for "seek" is a present-tense verb, *zēteō*, which has several possible nuances: "seek, search, inquire, investigate, require, or demand." In some instances, the emphasis is on "felt need for" something. God is One "sought after," because human beings are keenly aware of the vacancy in their lives without Him. That is, this seeking is not a mere *intellectual project*, but a *love-driven passion*. In effect, Paul suggests the cry of the human heart sounds like, "Who are you, O God, You who has placed me *here* and made me *now*?"

This language echoes the Old Testament, "**Seek** the LORD ("Yahweh") while he may be found (time) call upon him while He is near (space)" (Isaiah 55:6). This statement comes at the end of a chapter which begins, "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters (55:1)...nations that do not know you will hasten to you (55:5). And it proceeds to tell how God's Word comes down from heaven and restores the earth (see also, Isaiah 51:1; Hosea 10:12 ["it is *time* to seek the Lord"]). Also, we noted in a previous study (Acts 15) how God restored Israel so that "the remnant of human beings might seek the Lord...all the Gentiles called by my name..." (Acts 15:17). That is, God has placed restored Israel *in the midst* (space) of the nations at *this time* so that the nations might hear the Good News preached by restored Israel and believe in the One True God.

In this way, Paul is already issuing his invitation to the Athenians. He does not wait until the end of his speech, but calls them to trust the One True God by using this important word, "Seek."

10. "Reach out for him, find him..." This is also an invitational statement. What does it mean to "reach out"? The Greek word used here is an unusual verb: *psēlaphaō* which means to "touch, feel, feel around for." Its dominant meaning is highly *tactile* — touching, groping — as a blind person or a person in the dark trying to find their way. A person who "touches" in this way is moving his hands over a surface, hoping for something familiar to come within their grasp. One might argue that human religious devotion and philosophical inquiry are both a great deal like a person groping in the dark, feeling their way, seeking to find something familiar, something filled with warmth and security. Students of Plato probably recalled the Allegory of the Cave, and the world of shadows which at last gave way to the light of the sun.
11. "Find him...not far from each one of us..." What we know about darkness or blindness is that they "hide" objects which are still there nonetheless. God is always present within His world, or, as Paul frames it, "not far from (Greek: *ou makran apo*) each one of us." Once again, we observe Paul's skill in connecting his words with Epicurean and Stoic thought while, at the same time, making sharp distinctions from the message he is proclaiming. Epicureans would not consider the gods to be "near" in any sense of that word! Nor should human beings, following the Epicurean "story-line," ever be encouraged to "feel their way toward God." On the other hand, Stoics were far too confident that human beings were already "part of God," in a literal sense, such that the being of God and their being were somehow common — the fundamental problem with pantheism or even panentheism (see our comments and footnote above). Yes, Paul is telling his audience, it is true that God is not far from everyone of us. But the fact that we must "move toward Him" reveals the plain fact *that God is not the same as His world*, though He is related to His world in loving and merciful ways.

The use of spatial language ("far from...") with reference to God shows that Paul accepts the underlying difference between God and His world, between God and human beings. God is the Creator and we are His creatures. But we are not God (Sorry, Shirley Maclaine!). We can become the children of God by "seeking, feeling, reach out for Him," but we are not physically or metaphysically composed of God-stuff. We are *made in the image of God*, related to God's character, purpose, dominion, and design, but we are not ontologically (that is, "in our being") *the same as God*. Paul is quite careful here that he does not compromise the truth about the One True God in his efforts to "connect" with his Athenian audience.

What follows, at the end of Paul's narration, is his citation of Greek poets. These references add a certain credible "flavor" to the speech, revealing to the audience that Paul is "no dummy" when it comes to their own literature. We hasten to add that Paul's main statements about God do not depend on these citations. Everything Paul has declared to the Athenians rests on the fundamental tenets of the Hebrew faith — the grand story of God found in the Old Testament (see such texts as Isaiah 42:5, 8). That is, Paul does not need the wisdom of Greek philosophy in order to say the sort of things he says in Acts 17:24-27, rather he merely needs to read what Torah has told him since his childhood.

That being said, though Paul's ideas about God do not derive from Greek thought, Greek thought certainly offers Paul wonderful cultural raw material for connecting his view of God with the ages-old longing of the human race for an immediate experience of that God. And so, he makes a number of important Greek-based affirmations (17:28):

1. "For in him we live and move and have our being..." Though Paul does not directly footnote the first literary allusion, we have evidence of several sources he might have followed, including an address to Zeus by his son Minos: "...you are risen and alive forever, for in you we live and move and have our being..."¹⁵ and was part of a poem attributed to Epimenides (6th century B.C.E.). Great care is taken by Paul in citing this quotation. He is willing to accept the equation of Zeus=God in order to offer the statement to his audience. But the statement itself does not play into the pantheism (or panentheism) of the Stoics, since he draws a sharp line between "being *in him*" and simply "being *him*." Yes, we are *in God* but we are not *the same as God*. The three-fold action underscores that we are the *creations of God* without *being God Himself*:
 - a. "We live" (*zōmen*).
 - b. "We move" (*kinoumetha*).
 - c. "We are" (*semen*)

Each verb form is present tense. The claim of the Christian Gospel is that God is a "Living God," who belongs to the *present reality* of human life and not to the *dusty past* of an heroic age *long gone*, but now irrelevant to our lives. Our relationship to this God is that of "We" to "Him," thus preserving our individual identity while at the same time maintaining a personal relationship with God the Giver of Life. Therefore, we are not Stoics, lost in the God of pantheism. Our relationship to this God is a near-present existence in which we actually live, move, and exist with the God who is with us. Therefore, we are not Epicureans, whose gods are unconcerned, unaffected or indifferent to the human condition.

Paul seems to suggest that the Greek poet responsible for this statement either knew more about the nature of God than he was letting on, or else, spoken like a prophet, and was unaware of the deeper meaning of his words which came from God Himself.

2. "As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Scholars are fully agreed that Paul cites Aratus, a poet from Paul's home region of Cilicia, in his *Phainomena* 5. But he may also be referring to Cleanthes familiar *Hymns to Zeus* 4. Elsewhere in Paul's own writings, he shows acquaintance with Greek

¹⁵ This is cited in the Syriac language by Ishodad in his commentary on Acts 17. According to Clement of Alexandria, the statement originated with a work by Epimenides the Cretan, and was part of a poem known to Diogenes Laertius who lived much later. See Bruce, p. 338 for the details and references.

literature and some of the same poets (see Titus 1:12 and 1 Corinthians 15:33). Using these citations works well rhetorically within Paul's speech. However, as we have suggested, nothing in the quotations was required to make the case for God as Creator and Sustainer of His world, the God who comes close to human beings, and who desires that they seek and reach out to Him, as beings living, moving and existing through Him. In the minds of his audience, Paul ceases to be some "seed picker" or religious "hay-seed" and becomes a human being who shows respect for Athenian and Greek ideas, while wisely selecting, critiquing and judiciously applying them to his telling of "the story of God."

Argument (*probatio*), 17:29-31

His narration having reached its end, Paul now begins to make good use of the material he has set before the Athenians. The definitive word which introduces 17:29 is "Therefore" (*oun*) — the word which brings the narration to a point and draws a series of conclusions from it. The narrative of 17:24-28 constitute the "if-statements" which are followed by a rather large and significant "then-statement" — where the argument is finally headed.

Paul argues from the role of human beings as "offspring of God," to a deeper understanding of what God is truly like (see our remarks above on the relationship between God and Jesus). What he cites in the Greek writers is a simple affirmation that human beings are truly related to God *divinely*, but *distinctly*, and thereby he avoids the missteps of both Epicureanism and Stoicism in a single step. To be the offspring of God suggests that human beings bear *the image of God*, a prominent theme in the Hebrew Bible and throughout the teaching of early Christianity. Want to know what God looks like *minimally*? Look at human beings: they live, move and exist. What then can we say, minimally, about God? He must also live, move and exist as well. Now, says Paul, take a good long look at images of gold, silver and stone. Do *they* live, move and exist? Of course not! Therefore, we should not suppose that gods which can be formed by human hands could ever be true gods at all. In point of fact, the altar to the "unknown God" is a far more accurate reflection of God's nature because it does not presume to define God in physical terms at all, but allows God simply to *be* — even if mysteriously so.

We are brought back to the "unknown God" theme in 17:30 when Paul speaks about "times of ignorance." Although the English translations might omit it, Paul does use the word "therefore" (*oun*) again to introduce this verse. "Therefore, *then* God overlooked the times of the ignorance..." (Greek: *tous men oun chronous tes agnoias*). Consistent with his understanding of *time*, Paul speaks in terms of a "then" followed by a "now," just as he will sometimes speak about the "already" alongside the "not yet." In this case, Paul lumps all of time *before now* as a period of *hē agnoia*, "the not-knowing." The altar to the "unknown God" belongs to the lengthy times of "not-knowing." The worship of idols made from silver, gold or stone belongs to the times of "not-knowing." Elsewhere, we hear similar words in Acts 14:16 (which we have already studied), in that case, Paul told his audience that God "allowed..." the nations to follow "their *own ways*," whereas in this case, he "overlooks their ignorance..."

In what sense does God "overlook"? The Greek word is *huperoraō* and is perhaps a bit stronger than the usual translation "overlooked" might suggest! The verb carries the idea of "look over, look down on, slight, despise..." There is even a sharper meaning of "to ignore, disregard." God's attitude to past ignorance on the part of the nations was not a simple, "Oh well, they didn't know any better; I'll just overlook their silly ignorance." Rather, Paul is telling his audience that God was not pleased with the nations who acted in ignorance. However, something new has taken place and the old ignorance is being replaced by a fresh understanding of who God is.

Along with the new understanding comes new expectations from God Himself: he is calling on the whole world "to repent." Once more we meet our old friend *metanoia*, the Greek work which means a change of mind and heart. That change involves the setting aside of old agendas and ways of thinking and allowing God to fill the heart with His own truth contained in the Gospel. When Paul speaks about God's new expectation, he frames it using the verb *paragellō*, a military term which means "to give strict orders." A special use of the root word is

found in *paraggelma* which means to send a message by transmitting a beacon of light. Combining these ideas, we can understand Paul's point: God is now (*ta nun*, "in the now") sending a message with a beacon of light to the whole world. That light turns out to be Jesus, the light of the world!

Paul at this point pulls back the curtain on his Good News by announcing (17:31) that God has a number of plans in store for the world:

1. "He has appointed a day to judge the world in righteousness..." Literally, God has "set up a day." When applied to time, the verb *histēmi* means to "appoint." Within the clearly military language of this passage, Paul announces a decision-day, an ultimate day marked by a ruling of God the Maker and Judge. Within the Christian understanding of time, this corresponds to "the Day of Yahweh" and "the Day of Jesus Christ." On that day, God will finish the work of the New Creation begun in the first announcement of the Good News by Jesus of Nazareth. For God "to judge in righteousness" does not merely mean that God will do away with all the evil people by sending them to hell. "Judge" and "righteousness" are words which point to God "putting the world to rights," *restoring* what has been taken away and *healing* that which has been wounded. The Greek idea of *dikaioῦν*, "righteousness," is the same as "justice." When God "judges in righteousness," He is *correcting* that which is out of joint and *making straight* that which is crooked. The work of God the Judge, in Hebrew terms, is not done until all parties to the courtroom case have their grievances satisfied, and the Judge leaves the situation — which occasioned the case — better off than how He found it.
2. "By the man he has appointed..." Mysteriously, Paul inserts in his public announcement to Athens that God will one day judge the world "by the man..." Naturally, the audience wants to know, "What man?" It is as if they wait with baited breath for Paul to say "Behold, the Man!" in a way Pilate could not have intended such words. Just as God "appointed a day" (a matter of time), He has also "designated a man" to bring that day onto the stage of human history. Among the Stoics in Paul's audience, there was probably general agreement that things happened according to a pre-determined plan, and that each human being, like actors in a grand drama, had their special part to play. What Paul tells them, however, is that such a plan is embodied in a person and not simply in an abstract idea of human progress or impersonal destiny. **God's plan is bound up with God's man.** Nor does Paul go into egregious detail describing how this man was conceived as a demi-god or super-hero, as one might hear about such tales of the god Apollo or the goddess Athena. Instead....
3. "He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." Aeschylus, the 6th century Greek playwright, placed on the lips of Apollo these words: "When a man dies, and his blood is shed on the ground, there is no resurrection" (*Eumenides*, 647f). There may have been dying and rising among the gods, but not among human beings. Death, for the Greeks and Romans, meant descent into Hades, the "shades," from which no human being would emerge as a whole person ever again. Yes, a man's spirit might wander the earth as a ghost, failing of rest and repose. But that is not *resurrection*! Socrates and Plato canonized the notion that the soul was imprisoned in the body. Death was, for them, the final release, the liberation of spirit from matter. Human existence did not have, in the world of Plato, a re-embodied form after death.

That view is completely rejected by Paul and the early followers of Jesus. From Jesus' own lips we hear the words of promise, "I am the resurrection and the life..." (John 11). We are not whole persons without our bodies. Creation, Genesis 1&2-style, includes forming human beings from dust and breathing into their nostrils the breath of life so that they *become living souls*. The "soul," the *nephesh*, is the whole person not just the disembodied form of it. Paul devoted one long chapter of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15) to promoting the idea that God raised up Jesus and He will raise us up, not as simply persons who experience "life after death," but instead as persons who will experience "life after life after death." Resurrection of the dead is not about souls going to heaven when they leave their respective bodies, but about human beings — soul and body — being taken up into the resurrection life of Jesus. This is our hope and the fulfillment of God's promise to bring about the New Creation in a New Heaven and New Earth (see Revelation 21-22).

And this is the astonishing announcement that Paul makes to the Athenians. Yes, there is a "Jesus" (*Iēsous*) and there is "resurrection" (*anastasis*), but not as strange gods whom Paul wanted Athens to admit to their roster of approved deities. The Good News proclaimed by Paul was the hope of the world: Jesus and the resurrection from the dead. The ancient philosophies — Epicurean and Stoic alike — colluded with death by justifying its final power over human beings. Death has the final word, they all concluded, and we must simply make the necessary mental adjustment to its supreme authority. But for Paul, that view of death also belongs to the "ignorance" of the past which God refused to accept, and through Jesus, the man He has appointed, he defeats that death at its root, by raising His man from the dead.

Conclusion (*peroratio*), 17:32-34.

Paul has no time for a further summation. His audience, grasping the issues raised by this startling claim, divide neatly three ways: those who mocked, those who believed and those who offered to hear Paul at least one more time before deciding. Nothing seems strange about these outcomes, nor does Paul offer the precise statistics — the breakdown of these choices.

What does matter for Luke is the names of two people, Dionysius and Damaris: one a member of the Athenian court and the other a woman. In addition, Luke mentions "...others with them." The Greek word for "others" is the word *heteroi* which implies "others of a different kind," that is, not part of the households of Dionysius or Damaris. However, the word *sun*, "with," implies the formation of a Christian community in Athens, with these respondents as its nucleus. Later tradition, as attested by the historian Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4.11 and 4.23.3) claimed that Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens. Some early Christian writers thought that Damaris was Dionysius' wife. None of this is established, of course, but proposals such as these reveal the keen interest in how things turned out for the Christian witness in Athens, this ancient, respected city, famed for its philosophy, art and literature. Having begun with the mention of two supposed *new gods* — Jesus and Anastasis — Luke concludes with *real converts* — one man and one woman. As a result of Paul's preaching, at least some of paganism's disciples become instead the followers of Jesus. What happened in Athens that day may have been but a small drop in the river of Christian evangelism in Europe. However, in a city with the stature of Athens, such small victories are great indeed.

Some years later, the church father Tertullian would ask cynically, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"¹⁶ His beef with Greek thought was importing its secular ideas into Christian theology, and he compared that attempt to "mixing cheese with chalk!" I suspect he wouldn't have gotten any argument from Paul, since the apostle's intention in Acts 17 was *not to mix Christ and Socrates* but to offer a clear witness to the Athenians, using whatever legitimate literary tools were at his disposal. When he quotes a few minor poets, he does so, not to color the message he preaches, but to show that God has, all along, made Himself known to the pagan world, and to build, perhaps, some credibility with an audience which had written him off as a gossipy philosophical hack.

Concluding Thoughts

"Repentance for the Jew means turning away from the rejection of Jesus and toward the Messiah Jesus. Repentance for the Stoic, however, means turning away from his understanding of God as the built-in Law of the universe (actually his ignorance of God) to worship the God who transcends creation. In other words, in this sermon on Mars Hill, Paul recognizes that each person must make his own repentance in his own way, in light of the situation in which the gospel finds him."¹⁷

Was Paul's speech a failure? Hardly. "Some mocked," but "others said, 'We will hear you again.'" How many encounters or presentations of the gospel are needed to bring about a conversion? Usually more than one! There were some immediate conversions from an audience unschooled in the Old Testament and not

¹⁶ *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, ch. 7, 9.

¹⁷ Leander E. Keck, *Mandate to Witness*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964, pp. 121-122.

conditioned in an environment of monotheism. The wonder of the occasion is that any converted immediately. This was neither the first nor the last time the preaching of the gospel provoked mockery, rejection, even violence. Luke records many such instances, and history is replete with them.

Paul did not abandon his preaching principles in his address to the Areopagus. The *Romans* begins with a commentary on seeing God in nature, and 1 Corinthians 15:33 records a quotation from Epicurean philosophy. Paul adapted his message to particular audiences. Hans Conzelmann was correct when he wrote about this passage: it "is the most momentous Christian document from the beginnings of that extraordinary confrontation between Christianity and philosophy."¹⁸ It offers a useful model for similar encounters with "cultured despisers of religion." What we have in Acts 17:16-34 is a stunning example of what it means to "become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).

Glory to God! Amen.

¹⁸ "The Address of Paul on the Areopagus," in *Studies in Luke -Acts*, ed. Leander Keck and J. Louis Martyn, Nashville, 1966, p. 217.

Digger Deeper: *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If We Spoke Up?*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If We Spoke Up?*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Read through this week's lesson from Acts 17 and construct an outline which reflects the main ideas. Note the geographical progress of Paul through Greece.
2. What familiar form of opposition surfaces once more as Paul travels to the city of Thessalonica? Discuss the specific methods used by the agitators to interrupt the ministry of Paul and Silas. What role does Jason have in this incident, and how do you feel about the situation which faces him? Offer an assessment of his character in light of his hardship. How do Paul and Silas figure into the controversy?
3. What are some of the implications of this charge brought against Jason, Paul and Silas: "They are defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus" (17:7)? Respond to the statement: "The Christian message has nothing to do with politics." Base your answer on this incident.
4. Once Paul and Silas are in Berea, what seems to be different? Explain the statement: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica." In what sense were they *more noble*?
5. Under what circumstances does Paul go to Athens *alone*? Do you think this change in the cast of characters was important for Paul's ministry in Athens?
6. What deeply affects Paul as he surveys the culture of Athens? Why does it affect him in this way? How does he manage his feelings as he continues to minister in the city? What lesson might we take away from Paul's reaction?
7. Who engages Paul in the marketplace? Using outside resources (*Background Notes*, etc.), briefly profile the two groups of philosophers Paul encounters. Based on your new knowledge of these two schools of thought, can you predict how Paul might address them? How they would react to the Gospel Paul preached?
8. What specific "charges" do they bring to Paul, and how do they propose Paul answers them?
9. How does Paul bridge the cultural distance at the beginning of his speech? What specific observation does Paul make about the Athenians which serves as his "opener"?
10. List the main statements Paul makes about "God" in the narrative of his speech. Do you think Paul expected the Athenians to "know" these things about God?
11. Whom does Paul quote at the end of his "list"? Why does he do this?
12. Paul challenges the Athenians' view of God. What are the major differences between their view and Paul's?
13. What is the definitive claim made by Paul in 17:31, and how important is it to the Gospel message he usually preached?
14. Did Paul "change his message" to accommodate the Athenians? Explain.
15. In the final analysis, do you think the responses to Paul's speech were unusual? What do you conclude from this?