

The Acts of the Apostles

Sermon Number: 26

Acts 17:1 – 34

January 15, 2012

The Unknown God

We have passed through another Christmas and New Year's and have enjoyed the very appropriate seasonal messages on the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Now it is time to continue in the series on the Acts of the Apostles. It helps me to be reminded of how Luke begins this sequel to his Gospel.

Acts 1:1-2

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ESV

We come to the 17th chapter of Acts and it is to me one of the most instructive passages of Scripture in the Bible. This chapter tells us how to witness for Jesus to the Postmodern world.

The Postmodern world is just as religious as the church-going world they are simply ignorant of their religion. Paul deals with such ignorance in this chapter.

If the idolatry that Paul found in Athens in about 60 A.D. troubled him so much, what would he think about America in the year 2012?

America is every bit as religious as was Athens and every bit as given over to idols. We are too sophisticated to bow down before statues carved out of stone; we put them on the dash board of our vehicles.

Mostly we have our idols in our minds. The most popular idol is "science" whose worshippers scoff at what Paul preached about the Creator and Judge. Their god is called "evolution" and its two basic beliefs are time and chance. Those who believe in evolution are as religious as anyone can be because all they have is faith in unproven theories.

On the other end of the religious spectrum in America are the Postmoderns who accept any and all religions as equally valid with the exception of Christianity.

Postmoderns are very much offended by what Paul preached about a Man whom God has appointed to judge the world in righteousness.

To Postmoderns there is no moral judgment; they will believe that too late!

So here is my point. Everyone is religious. Even the verbal atheist knows there must be a God else he wouldn't spend any time at all rejecting a God he says doesn't exist. Paul says he suppresses the knowledge of God that he does have.

Man is constituted by God as a spiritual being and as such he will worship something.

With that as my introduction we will examine Acts 17.

To the Jew First

Acts 17:1-4

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.

Paul and Silas, with their backs still in pain from being beaten at Philippi, come to Thessalonica. They had left behind a newly planted local church that met in the home of Lydia [16:40].

Thessalonica is 62 miles from Philippi and was the largest and most important city in Macedonia. Paul's strategy in every city that he visited was "first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles." For three Sabbaths, Paul preached Christ from the Old Testament Scriptures in the synagogue, showing how it was necessary for Christ to die and to rise from the dead.

Only Jesus of Nazareth fulfills all the Scripture regarding the promises of the Messiah. "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

Some of the Jews, a great many Gentiles, and not a few of the leading women believed the Gospel and joined Paul and Silas.

Not Everyone Believed the Gospel Acts 17:5-9

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.

The Jewish leaders were greatly offended by the Gospel. The idea that Messiah would or even could die went against their preconceived notion of who Messiah would be and what Messiah would do when He did come. Messiah surely would not be a lowly carpenter; besides "no prophet ever came out of Galilee!"

So the Jews stirred up a mob of the rabble [lewd men, loafers] to attack the new Christians in Thessalonica.

The Jews seized Jason and accused him of defying Caesar's decrees saying that Jesus was a king. Of course Jesus is the King but He was no political threat to the Romans.

Jason is a Romanized name for Joshua or Jesus. This is most likely the Jason mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:21.

They forced Jason to post bond, assuring that Paul and Silas would leave town.

How can the Believing Jews know if what Paul preached is the Truth?

Acts 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.

Paul and Silas are sent to Berea, a small city about 50 miles from Thessalonica. The missionary team goes to the synagogue to preach that Jesus is Messiah.

The Berean's were more "noble" i.e. they were more educated.

They carefully compared what Paul preached with the Scriptures daily "to see if these things were so." This is an important lesson for everyone who listens to any preacher. Don't ever believe something just because Brother So and So preached it. Test what is preached by comparing it with the Bible.

I won't give away any names but a long time ago a medical doctor told me, referring to our preacher, "I tell him what medicine to take and he tells me what to believe." That is okay as long as you compare what the preacher says with the Word of God.

It is worth noting that in many cities on this missionary journey there were prominent women in the nucleus of the churches. [Cf. 16:13-15, 40; 17:4, 12]

Well the troublemakers from Thessalonica followed the team to Berea and stirred up the people as they had done before, forcing them to leave. But the Gospel was established in Berea. Paul was delivered and Silas and Timothy stayed behind to disciple the new believers.

The City of Gods

Acts 17:16-18

Light comes to a dark place. Paul was distressed to see a city given over to idols. Some records indicate that there were more idols in Athens than in all of the rest of Greece combined.

Athens, which was noted for its intellectual brilliance and education, was in utter spiritual darkness and was ignorant of the truth of God.

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 babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

Following his strategy, Paul goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath and made reasoned arguments with the Jews and God-fearers. Paul goes into the marketplace on other days of the week and reasons with the pagans.

The marketplace not only was where you haggled over the price of the goods being sold, but philosophers, teachers, and politicians would come there to take part in “deep” discussions about almost any subject.

They were always ready to hear some new philosophy and so they listened to Paul. Before long some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers called Paul a “babbler.” The word means “seed-picker”, a gutter-sparrow, a spreader of second-hand scraps of learning and philosophy.

Others said he was promoting foreign gods because he preached Jesus and the resurrection.

Epicureans were the disciples of Epicurus [340-270 BC] who taught that pleasure was “the chief end of life.” The goal of life was to be tranquil, free from pain, anxious thoughts, and the superstitious fear of death. They maintained that the gods took no interest in the life of men and women.

Stoics followed Zeno the Cypriot [340-365 BC]. They were pantheists who lived in harmony with nature and stressed the sufficiency of human rational powers and self-control. Human passions and emotions were to be suppressed. Suicide was recommended as a “means of escape from a life that could no longer be maintained with dignity.”

This helps us understand why Paul’s spirit was “provoked.”

Superstitious idolatry and pagan philosophy was the order of the day in Athens.

And we have Epicureans and Stoics, those who hold to the same philosophy of life, with us in the year 2012.

The Mars Hill Society

Acts 17:19-21

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.

There was a special place in Athens where philosophers and foreign visitors gathered to discuss the latest ideas called Areopagus, or the Hill of Ares, so named for the Greek god of war. The group that met on this hill was also called the Areopagus. They would be known as the “Mars Hill Society.”

Paul was invited to explain his “new teaching” to the “experts” in history, philosophy, and religion.

I see that in every way you are very religious.

Acts 17:22-23

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.

Paul begins with an observation, “I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” Paul had walked through the city and found it to be full of shrines, altars, and statues of many gods. Among the altars Paul saw one that had the inscription: “To the Unknown God.”

Paul, “wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove,” says, “You worship an unknown God, now I will tell you about Him.”

There is a God who may be Known.

Acts 17:24-34

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.^d 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. ESV

The words that Paul speaks in verse 28, "For in Him we live and move and have our being," is a direct quote from a poem by Epimenides. Epimenides was the philosopher who was responsible for the altar to the Unknown God. Paul uses what he knows about his audience and then relates it to the one true God. Paul uses the Greek word "theos" that the philosophers used for their supreme god and then ascribes the divine attributes and actions of the one True God.

Let's follow Paul's proclamation of God to his pagan audience.

God created the world and everything in it.[24; Genesis 1]

God is Lord of heaven and earth and is not confined to any man-made shrine or temple. [24; 1 Kings 8:27; Isaiah 66:1-2]

At the dedication of the temple Solomon says:

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! 1 Kings 8:27

Isaiah 66:1-2

Thus says the LORD:

"Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me,
and what is the place of my rest?

² All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things came to be,
declares the LORD.

God does not need anything from man whom He created but we are utterly dependent on God for “life, and breath, and everything else.” [25]

God created the human race from one man {one blood}. [26]

This destroys racism, be it black, white, red, or yellow!

No race or people is superior to another.

Job 31:15

Did not he who made me in the womb make him?
And did not one fashion us in the womb?

God providentially arranged places for humans to live.

God divided the land masses into continents and set the boundaries between land and sea and He oversees the rise and fall of empires. [26]

God has put in our nature the knowledge that there is God. [27]

Romans 1:20

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

God is near to us, a truth taught by the Greek poets. [28]

God is the Creator, so how can anyone think that He could be an image of metal or wood or stone made by the hands of man? [29]

God has overlooked the ignorance of the Athenians in the past but as a result of Paul’s preaching something has changed. [30]

God has appointed a time of judgment. [31]

The Man who is the Judge has already come and has been raised from the dead. [31]

Romans 1:1-4

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³ concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,....

When Paul mentioned the resurrection from the dead the Mars Hill Society became vocally divided. The Epicureans had no place in their philosophy for resurrection while the Stoics believed in an existence after this life. The Stoics were probably the ones who wanted to hear more from Paul.

As a result of Paul's speech, some people believed in Jesus. One of them was Dionysius, a member of the Mars Hill Society. Another was Damaris, a woman, who was not a member but was present at the meeting in the marketplace. [34]

As we conclude this study of Acts 17 let me repeat that it is very instructive on how to witness to people who have no background in the Bible; people who have not been brought up in Sunday School for example.

A simple outline:

- 1) God is [24].
- 2) God is not needy [25].
- 3) God is in control [26].
- 4) God is near [27].
- 5) God provides what we need [28].
- 6) God is not an idol [29].
- 7) Repentance is a command [30].
- 8) Judgment is coming [31].
- 9) Jesus is the Judge [31].
- 10) Assurance is in Christ [31].

So I say what Paul essentially said in Athens: Repent and believe in Jesus Christ.