

Lesson 25: Acts 17:1-34 Gentile Philosophy, Politics and Religion

Introduction

I was in the economics college in Split, speaking with the vice-dean about bringing American businessmen and women into English classes for a leadership seminar. He instructed me to send an official request to his office and then we would set up an appointment. I sent the letter and showed up for the appointment. I had my answers prepared for questions about the spiritual dimension of our Christian group. “Yes, we are a Christian organization. “No, our seminars in the classroom will not be spiritual or religious.” “Yes, we promote values in-line with orthodox Christian faith.” “No, we will not enter into spiritual discussion with students during class time.” I was prepared for the questions I expected the vice-dean to ask. I was not prepared for the question he did ask. “What political party are you associated with?” A bit surprised, I had no trouble honestly saying, “We are not connected to any political party. We are a spiritual organization.” Then he gave me this smile; a knowing smile and he responded, “Religion is always political.” He was either talking down to me, assuming I was just really naïve, or, more likely, he assumed I was hiding something from him. He denied the request for our group to go into the economics college.

That religion is always political is not an easy opinion to disagree with in this part of the world. Nationalities tend to align with one major religion. Croatians are Catholic. Serbs are Eastern Orthodox. Bosniaks are Muslim. And those religions are mixed up with the cultural identity and political process. The word, Protestant, brings up images of Northern Ireland. Politics and religion exist hand in hand. Back when I had that conversation, I might have argued a difference in the United States, at least that had been my experience, though lately a lot of Christians seem bound up with one political party or the other.

My interaction with the vice-dean raised two important questions. First, is all religion political? And second, how do you engage a non-believer who has a very different worldview than the one you are promoting; so different, that they assume you are either very naïve or you hiding what you really believe?

As Paul, Silas and Timothy continue their mission of proclamation through Macedonia and on into Greece, they encounter a mix of Gentile philosophy, politics and religion. In the first movement of the fifth part of Acts, Paul’s encounter with the Gentile worldview at Philippi brought into focus the difference between the Christian’s relationship with the Holy Spirit and Gentile spiritism. In this second movement as we interact Gentile politics, religion and philosophy, Luke will highlight differences relating to the Christian understanding of God the Son and God the Father. In the introduction a contrast is established between the synagogues of Thessalonica and Berea. That contrast will help set us up for the problem, resolution and follow-up that happens in Athens.

We begin with the introduction in Thessalonica and Berea. This is Acts 17:1-15.

Thessalonica and Berea

¹ Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and *saying*, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason,

they were seeking to bring them out to the people. ⁶ When they did not find them, they *began* dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. ⁹ And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

¹⁰ The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so. ¹² Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. ¹³ But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.

Thessalonica and the Jealous Accusation (1-10)

Leaving Philippi, Paul followed the famous Via Egnatia, a Roman road that connected Philippi to the Adriatic coast in the province of Illyricum and then across by ship across the sea to Italy and on to Rome. Along this major trade route Paul journeyed through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica. At the time, Thessalonica boasted a long heritage being founded in 315 BC by Cassander, one of the successor generals who fought for a piece of Alexander the Great’s empire. In Paul’s day, the city could claim to be the most influential city of Macedonia, sitting on the via Egnatia, blessed with an impressive harbor, the Roman administrative center of the province and home to the proconsul. Thessalonica fit Paul’s strategic preference for establishing Christian fellowships in significant urban centers that could then spread the Gospel throughout the region.

Unlike Philippi, there is a synagogue in Thessalonica. According to his custom, Paul goes there the first Sabbath he is in town, recognizing his obligation to the local Jewish population to announce the coming of the Messiah. And, though he usually encountered significant opposition in the synagogue, his teaching also usually bore fruit there among some Jews and among God-fearers.

Luke summarizes Paul’s message in a way that gives us some insight not only into the content but also into the method. The content is summarized in two points. First point, the Messiah was supposed to suffer and die and rise from the dead. Second point, Jesus is the Messiah. That’s the content.

What can we discern about Paul’s method of presentation? How does he communicate these truths? Paul will later write in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5).” This may mean that Paul’s preaching was accompanied by miraculous signs - it came in power. Though it is quite interesting that he does not mention any particular miracles in his letter nor does the book of Acts mention miracles here in Thessalonica. The “power” in this case might simply mean that spiritual power accompanied the Word, working internally in the hearts of some who hear so that they might believe. Just as in Philippi, where we are told the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to believe. Paul’s method always depends on the power of the Holy Spirit to work through his words.

Luke’s specific emphasis here is on the mind. He speaks of those who were persuaded to believe. And he describes Paul as reasoning with them, explaining and giving evidence. The reasoning of Paul was from the Scriptures. And his explaining must have included the historical facts concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus along with the Gospel word of Jesus.

Paul’s reasoning from Old Testament Scriptures followed the pattern Jesus set with his own disciples: the pattern that Luke recorded for us in his Gospel, Luke 24:44-47.

⁴⁴ Now Jesus said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

Paul presented that same message, and he was depending on Jesus Christ again to open up their minds to understand the Scriptures. So, for three weeks he’s handling the Scriptures as he reasons in the synagogue. And as he does this, two things happen. Some of the Jews believe. Not all, not a majority, just some. We could imagine that, if the majority believed, the whole synagogue might become a redeemed fellowship of Jesus-followers. But only some Jews believed. The other thing that happens is that “a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women” believed. That is where the jealousy comes in, the motivating factor that Luke cites for what follows.

You can imagine how the Jews of this synagogue for decades, possibly centuries, had held to a Biblical worldview of one God and moral living. They distanced themselves from Thessalonian beliefs and practice. And they have some success in bringing Gentiles into their synagogue as God-fearers. And they worked among those Gentiles to convince them to become full proselytes of Judaism.

Now this fellow Paul shows up announcing something new. And in the newness, he declares all the work to maintain Jewish cultural identity unnecessary. He proclaims Christ to the God-fearing Gentiles and, of course, they prefer his way. He lets them eat whatever they want. He doesn’t require circumcision. They can follow Jesus without becoming Jewish. It is easy-believism. So easy! All they have to do is place their faith in Jesus as the Christ and then all of a sudden, they are forgiven, they’re included. So, these Jews are angry at what they are losing and jealous that their former Gentile contacts are deserting them for this liberal message about Jesus, and grace, and forgiveness.

John the Baptist provides a very different contrast in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. His disciples are also upset. They are upset that Jesus’ disciples are baptizing people. “You know, that’s our thing. We baptize people. You came up with that, John. And not only are they doing your thing, but more and more people are going over to them. Their movement is getting bigger and it’s taking away our people.” How does John the Baptist respond? “He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30).”

John recognized that he was not the center of the show. He was the friend of the bridegroom, not the bridegroom. Loving Jesus, he could hand over followers with joy, you know, as a bride going to her husband. These Jews were meant to be stewards. They are not the main show. But they did not love Jesus. They loved their own cultural, religious identity, the position they had kind of carved out for themselves. They have worked hard. Their fathers had worked hard. Their grandfathers had worked hard to establish this synagogue. They saw themselves as the suffering servant who had persevered so long in following Yahweh in the midst of this Roman-Greek culture. They had no joy as the multitudes went over to the New Covenant, placing their faith in Jesus.

I wonder sometime about my own heart. How much do I love my own movement, my own church, more than I really love Jesus? And it can show up in how I feel about other churches, about other movements who are experiencing this reality Luke has just reported, “a large number believed”? Influential people believed. I’ve got my church and my group going on and we’re just, kind of, working hard and maintaining our numbers, maybe losing some numbers, and there’s this church on the other side of the town, and there’s this other student movement, and they are just booming. Or even with CRU, it can be a student movement at another university or in another country, and they are really growing and we’re not. And I can be tempted to even question, you know, what are they really teaching over there? What are they really doing? And bitterness and jealousy can enter in

instead of the joy that multitudes are following Jesus, that he is gathering His bride in? It is a good heart check.

In this case, the jealousy that comes from those who should have viewed themselves as forerunners and stewards, leads to violence. Frustrated by an inability to persuade through reason and respectful dialogue, the opponents of Paul, stir up passions and they incite anger through falsehood. The crowd is directed to Jason's house. That's a good Greek name. It reminds me of the myth about Jason and the Argonauts. But this Jason has believed in Jesus and opened his house to Paul and his band, certainly for hospitality, maybe it had become the gathering place of the church after the synagogue was barred to them. Paul and Silas aren't there when the crowd shows up, so they drag Jason before the magistrates. And the magistrates take the charges seriously enough to listen, they are also stirred up, but not seriously enough to punish Jason or anybody there at that moment. Instead, he has to give pledge, which means he had to pay a bond, promising there would be no trouble, we're not trying to start a riot or incite against the government. As a result, the brethren determine together with Paul that he ought to leave the city.

Let's consider the nature of the charge that was leveled at Paul. "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." The charge is essentially political. Paul encourages rebellion against Caesar. All region is political. If Jesus is a king, he must be a king like Caesar is a king and, therefore, he must be in opposition to Caesar.

Paul had indeed proclaimed that Jesus is the King, and the Christ is the anointed son of David who will reign eternally. That part of the charge is true. But does allegiance to Jesus as King mean a rejection of Caesar as King?

It depends on what kind of Kingdom Jesus has come to establish. Are religion and politics one and the same, or is religious devotion to Jesus something that supersedes all other commitments without necessarily abolishing lesser commitments?

Jesus is indeed King, but He has not chosen to establish His reign on earth, not yet. His rule is currently a spiritual rule from Heaven. We submit to His lordship unequivocally. And in line with that lordship, Jesus Himself has commanded us to pray for and submit to the authorities in the nation where we live.

Jesus indicated this kind of spiritual reign in His conversation with Pilate just before His crucifixion. John 18:35-37,

³⁵ Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?"

³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

³⁷ Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?"

Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

There is no truly Christian political party or Christian political system. That is to bring Christ down. All parties and systems are flawed. We ought to remember the whole point of Old Covenant kingship that even the very best of human kings, David and Josiah, are seriously flawed. It's the point of the first third of Isaiah with the comparison between one of the worst, Ahaz and one of the best, Hezekiah. Neither son of David became the type of King necessary to establish God's Kingdom on earth.

We need a true leader who can overcome the depravity of the human heart and who can deliver us, not only from our enemies, but from the greater enemy that dwells inside of us: from our own

depravity. We need a child to be born to us, a son to be given on whose shoulders the government will rest, who is of the root of David, and yet transcends David, whose name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace, of whose government there will be no end. He will reign on the throne of David and over His kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then and forevermore! (Isaiah 9:6-7). That's the King we need. No prime minister, no president, no party, no platform, no political system can achieve Godly political leadership. That was one of the lessons God intended for us to learn from the theocracy of Israel, from the Old Covenant. So, we are not tasked, as a New Covenant people, with the purpose of establishing a physical kingdom on earth. That was Old Covenant.

The New Covenant presents something quite different. We are a spiritual body. Our primary purpose is not to establish a nation state, but to go and make disciples of all nations, to establish a remnant of believers among every ethnic group. Now, Christians ought to engage in politics with the intent of blessing society through just laws and just leadership. But our fundamental purpose is aligned with Heaven, not earth. We seek to bring every man, woman and child into spiritual relationship with God the Father, so that we all might be conformed to the image of the Son.

The Jews of Thessalonica reject Paul's claim that Jesus is King in the sense that God is King. They intentionally misconstrue his words, bringing Christ down and making him a political, human king on the level of Caesar. They know this is not the claim Paul had made. They know that they themselves recognize God as King and yet, submit to the laws of Caesar. Sometimes Christianity is entangled with politics by the Christians themselves. Sometimes we do that. Sometimes it is a misunderstanding from those listening who have no conception of religion separate from politics, like the vice-dean I was talking to. In this case, the Gospel was intentionally entangled with Gentile politics, at least by some of the Jewish opponents who wanted to create problems for the Gospel messengers.

The charge of political sedition with allegiance to Jesus characterized as opposition to Caesar paints a very different picture to the teaching revealed by Paul in his two letters to the Thessalonians. We can ask, what was Paul teaching? He is teaching that Jesus is the Christ. What are the implications of that? Does liberation theology follow? Are we setting up a Jewish kingdom? What follows? And we recognize that both letters, 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians, were written on this same missionary journey when Paul is going to be in Corinth for a year and a half, and he makes comments in the first letter about sending Timothy back when he was still in Athens. He wanted to come back to Thessalonica but probably because of this pledge Jason had to commit and the problem with the magistrates he was not able to, but he mentions sending Timothy back and that he wants to come. So, this letter is following closely after these events. It's just some months later.

There is considerable agreement between both letters, giving us insight into the content that Paul had taught them when he actually was with them. He taught them about the second coming of Christ, about living worthy of the Gospel, about the election of the saints and sanctification and perseverance in affliction, about unruly brothers, bearing up the weak, about sexual purity, about working hard, giving to those in need, leading an orderly life. He does not speak against Rome. He does not promote the Jewish state. It is not political teaching. It is teaching that makes good citizens, who will be a blessing to the city as they submit their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

My friend Josh Irby, the leader for Cru ministry in Bosnia, was interviewing young Muslims while doing research for a book he was writing about the Protestant missionary to Bosnia, Paulina Irby. The young Muslim commented about Protestants, "You are the spiritual Christians." That is not true everywhere when people hear the word, Protestant, not up in Ireland, but in his experience Roman Catholicism was inextricably tied up with Croatian politics and Eastern Orthodoxy with Serbian politics, but Protestants were the ones who weren't aligned to any nation. They were just the ones who sought to love God and love their neighbor. That's awesome! Whatever our label people use for us, Evangelicals kind of taking on some negative political overtones to that one; that one may be on the way out, but Protestant, Evangelical, just Christian, Christ-follower, but whatever label in

whatever country, how sad it is when our faith becomes so mixed up with our politics that our audience cannot distinguish between the two. But how awesome when they hear what movement or what church you belong to and they're thinking, "Wow, you're the guys who want to love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself! You're the spiritual Christians!"

Berea and the Noble Search (11-15)

The second part of the introductory section occurs on Paul's next stop in Berea. The Berean Jews establish for us a contrast to the Thessalonian Jews, and also a contrast to the Athenian philosophers. Luke described them this way, "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

Rather than hold on to their pre-conceived notions of what ought to be true about the Messiah and the New Covenant, the Bereans wanted to know what God taught about the Messiah and the New Covenant. They sought a perspective of the world that was defined by revelation from God, not by human religion and tradition. The Thessalonians provide a picture of entrenched religion that refuses to reassess its presuppositions according to the revelation of God's Word. Their traditions supersede the Word of God. The people of Athens will contrast the Bereans in a different way. The Athenians are not holding on to their own traditional interpretation of revealed truth. They have developed a worldview based on human myth and reason. They reject Scriptural revelation altogether, providing their own answers to the big questions about God, reality, truth, life, human nature.

Many Bereans believed in Jesus. But Jews from Thessalonica stirred up crowds there as well, forcing Paul out again. Silas and Timothy were able to remain. Heading out of Berea, Paul left the Via Egnatia, choosing instead to enter the province of Achaia and the famed city of Athens. There Paul encountered a new problem. The worldview of the Athenians was so different from the Jewish worldview that his message was almost incomprehensible at first. In this text we will consider this problem of misunderstanding, how Paul addresses the misunderstanding, and the follow-up response to his explanation. Rather than read the whole section at once, I will start with just the misunderstanding. After that we will read the explanation and follow-up. So, here's the misunderstanding in Acts 17:16-21.

In Athens (17:16-34)

Problem: A misunderstanding (16-21)

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. ¹⁷ So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing *Gentiles*, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. ¹⁸ And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?" ²⁰ "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean." ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

Paul again is in the synagogue, reasoning with the Jews and God-fearers. At the same time, he is in the marketplace, reasoning with whoever he encounters there. The report in Thessalonica affirms Paul's core message to the Jews regarding Jesus as Messiah, while also revealing how the Christian view of Jesus as King sounds like a challenge to Gentile political systems.

Here in Athens, the focus is all on Gentile religious and philosophical systems. The initial misunderstanding is about the nature of Jesus. The explanation will establish the Biblical view of God the Father as Creator, and God the Son as Judge. But before that explanation, we need to first understand better this misunderstanding.

Athens shares center stage with Sparta as the two most famous Greek city-states. Here is a brief introduction of Athens in Paul's day from F. F. Bruce.

"Although Athens had long since lost the political eminence which was hers in an earlier day, she continued to represent the highest level of culture attained in classical antiquity. The sculpture, literature, and oratory of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. have, indeed, never been surpassed. In philosophy, too, she occupied the leading place, being the native city of Socrates and Plato, and the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. In all these fields Athens retained unchallenged prestige, and her political glory as the cradle of democracy was not completely dimmed. In consideration of her splendid past, the Romans gave Athens the right to maintain her own institutions as a free and allied city within the Roman Empire."¹

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who engaged Paul in dialogue labeled him, "a babbler." "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" Literally, the word means, "seed-speaker." It is the image of a bird flittering from one seed to the other, or it's like a sparrow outside McDonald's, feasting on the fries and bits of hamburger bun tossed their way. A seed-speaker picks up scraps of thought here and there, just flittering around, and then tries to pass off the jumbled-up mess as a coherent system. It's a rather common approach in our day as people who consider themselves spiritual pick up a little of this and a little of that, treating religion like a buffet, with no commitment to coherence or consistency. You know, it's anathema to the philosophers. It's like he's not even trying. And though Paul's worldview was in actuality very robust, it was so different from the philosophers of Athens, they struggled to make sense of it. They thought he was just babbling.

They were probably also misled by his use of common Greek to communicate his ideas. My undergraduate degree was Philosophy of Science. I remember once having a lecturer from Duke University come and speak to us on the philosophy of language. And he spoke with a southern drawl. It was really interesting, this a very intelligent person. And he told us he would emphasize his accent when he engaged in philosophical debates because it always disarmed his opponents. They assumed he was not on their level. I'm from North Carolina, I can do it, too. But just hearing that, it's a little slower, it doesn't sound so cultured. Paul is using common Greek.

Philosophers prize precision of language and logic. Precision requires a very specific use of language that is devoid of ambiguity. Classical Greek or Attic Greek was the preferred philosopher's dialect. Early in the days of the Enlightenment, during the revival of all things Greek, religious scholars believed the Bible was written in some special, spiritual version of Greek, because it was quite different from Attic Greek that was being studied. But as more and more average texts were surfaced through archaeology and research it became clear that the Greek of the Bible was Koine Greek. It was the Greek of everyday speakers. And that was scandalous to the religious scholars, who wanted the Bible to be on this elite high level. We know Paul wrote with Koine Greek, and I assume Paul he spoke as he wrote, just using the common Greek language, not seeking to impress with his rhetorical ability, but rather aiming to make his message accessible to every listener, whether they're philosophically educated or not. Paul wrote to Corinthians,

"¹When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)."

Paul doesn't assume that an uneducated person is unable to handle difficult concepts. Paul communicates some hard things to understand, but he doesn't use an elite, university level language that would be inaccessible. It wasn't just his language, though. At the heart of the confusion was the Greek conception of the spiritual world. And that's both true on the level of just Greek myth and kind of the average man's Greek religion, and also the Greek philosophers, who sought more sophistication in their understanding of the gods than a literal acceptance of Greek myth. Stoics may

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 329.

have spoken of Zeus as God, but they did not conceive him as outside of nature. He was the soul of nature, the divine element present in the material universe. Their philosophy was essentially pantheistic. They believed in a rational, controlled approach to life with a high sense of morality and honor. Epicureans did not deny the gods but believed they did not involve themselves in the affairs of people. You know, they exist in their realm, we exist in our realm. And they are known for promoting pleasure as the chief end of life but that might not sound what you think it means. They did not promote hedonistic debauchery. Not just sex and getting drunk and just partying all the time. Epicureans argued that the pleasure most worth seeking was “a freedom from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears.”²

The Epicureans and Stoics looked down on Paul’s common Greek language and on his new concepts as uneducated, naïve, foolish, incoherent. So, they call him a “babbler.”

Luke also tells us that some others were also confused by Paul’s reference to the resurrection. They assumed he was “‘a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.” The plural, “strange deities,” apparently indicates they thought Paul was using the word for “resurrection,” Anastasis, as a god. You know, Jesus was one deity and Anastasis was another deity. When people hear a foreign message, they seek to understand that message according to the lens of their own worldview. The Greeks connected the gods both with phenomena and with abstract qualities. So, Zeus was not only the god of the storm, he was the storm. Aphrodite was not only the goddess of love, she was love. So, when Paul speaks of resurrection, a sensible Greek confusion would be to interpret Anastasis as a god, the god of resurrection who is resurrection.

And it’s a common problem witnessing to people with a very different worldview. They’re just taking what you say and re-translating it. It is like proclaiming to a Hindu that Jesus is God and ought to be worshiped. You might get the response, “Yes, exactly. Jesus is god and ought to be worshiped.” And that sounds like agreement. You know, we are getting somewhere. In fact, things just got more confused, because the Hindu is able to incorporate many gods into his or her system and is able to worship gods and worship people. So, you’re not really sure if we’ve just agreed that Jesus is a god, or if He just has a divine spirit, and He is certainly not the only god, and we’re not anywhere near grace yet. So, the Hindu has interpreted through his own lens, incorporating what he has heard without understanding the vast difference that the Christian meant to be communicating between the two different worldviews.

This is Paul’s problem. Either the philosophers are looking down on the Gospel message as foolish and common and just a jumbled-up mess, or they interpret the Gospel through the lens of their own system, and they are going to change it to fit into their worldview. How does Paul address this failure to understand his message? Let’s consider his speech to this elite gathering of thinkers and leaders, which is the Areopagus of Athens.

Resolution: The explanation (22-33)

²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and

² Bruce, 330–331.

exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'²⁹ "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man."³⁰ "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent,"³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

In the Jewish synagogue, Paul moved quickly into the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. With the polytheistic Gentiles of Athens, he took a step back to first proclaim the true nature of God the Father. The altar to an unknown God provided a cultural bridge he could invite his listeners to consider a different perspective. It's connected to a belief they already have but it's something new. The true nature of the gods was a long-discussed topic of Greek philosophy. Paul claimed to have knowledge that was unknown to the Athenians. He defined God as Creator and as Lord of Heaven and earth. And that is a departure from typical mythology whether Canaan, or Babylonian, or Greek, which identifies a vague, far off god like Chronos as creator, and then identified a rebellious storm-god son like Zeus as Lord. Paul claims that the one true God is both Creator and current Lord.

Paul also rejects the pagan idea that God is somehow material, dwelling in a physical temple or that He needs to be fed wine and food by his worshipers. God is independent of His creation. God does not have any needs that human beings can fulfill. Human beings, on the other hand, are dependent. God gives them the breath of life and provides the physical universe as a dwelling place.

Also, contrary to pagan polytheism, the nations do not owe their existence to their own set of gods. Spiritual reality is not relative to the religious system adopted by each nation. God made one man and from that one man God brought into existence every nation of the world. Moreover, God sovereignly determines the times and boundaries of each people's existence.

Paul seems to be alluding back to the tower of Babel, when he declares God's intention in separating the nations from one another was so that they might grow grope for Him in the darkness, that they might seek Him out. And that does not mean that each people group must find the place where God lives. As Stephen declared in his speech before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, God does not live in the Temple in Jerusalem. We should not think that God exists in one place rather than another. Paul says,

"He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man."

In this speech, Paul has rejected the polytheistic view of classic Greek mythology and the broader polytheistic practice which allows for each people group to set up its own pantheon of gods. There is one God, he is God of all, having made all peoples from one man. Now, we might notice that this is also a rejection of some modern views on human evolution and on relative truth.

On a very surface level, the comment that "God is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist," might sound like a place of agreement for the pantheistic Stoic view that God is the soul of the physical universe. But a Stoic find Paul's claim that God created all things as completely incompatible with his view. For the Stoic, God is the soul of the universe, not a spiritual being who exists independent, or outside, of the material world. The Epicurean idea that the gods remain distant and disconnected from human affairs is also rejected by Paul's claim that God is sovereign over all and that God desires to be sought after and found, and later that God is inviting us to repentance, to engage with Him.

At the end of the speech, Paul has created a second cultural bridge, just like the reference to the unknown god, he quotes a Greek poet when he declares, "We are also his children." Now, we need to think about this. Paul is not trying to define Biblical truth through Greek philosophy. He is not

searching for concepts in philosophy that will help him to define Scripture. A correct understanding of what it means to be a child of God start with Genesis chapter 1. We are created by God in His image. That's fundamental and it cannot be provided outside of Biblical revelation. Paul is using the poet here as a culturally relevant invitation for his listeners to consider the message he is proclaiming. He is reaching for something they might accept and agree to, but then he is calling them over the bridge. You know, come, move from your worldview to what I am proclaiming to you.

Paul's declaration that God has overlooked times of ignorance is not an assertion that God does not hold pagan peoples accountable for sin committed prior to their awareness of the Gospel. That's not what he is saying. When we go somewhere else where Paul has developed this more, like Romans 1:18-32, we see his argument that everybody is accountable for knowledge of God. The creation makes us accountable. It is our duty to seek Him. What Paul is saying here is that God will not hold the Athenians' ignorance against them at the present time. Paul has not come to bring wrath on the Athenians for their rejection of the one true God. They already stand under judgment. Paul has come to call them to repent based on God's willingness to forgive. God is not locking them out. They are welcome to come to Him. It is at this point that Paul communicates the critical need of every human being and at least begins to suggest that that need is met in Jesus Christ.

"God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

Paul did step back from Jesus to take time to define the nature of God the Father as the one true God, Creator of all things, independent from the created world. Even in doing so, Paul does not shy away from bringing his message all the way forward to a declaration of Good News through faith in Jesus Christ. As Peter did on Pentecost, Paul declares the need of everyone present to repent. He identifies Jesus as the judge of all. He is the one they need to turn to. And he declares the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ as proof that he has been appointed judge of all humanity by God.

There is a tension, there is always a tension in evangelism between not wanting to move to the Gospel so quickly that our listeners cannot understand or receive what we are saying, and the opposite problem of discussing foundation spiritual ideas without ever communicating the specific claims to the Gospel regarding Jesus, sin, judgment, forgiveness, and resurrection. Paul engaged that tension in this speech. He took a step back to clarify the nature of God the Father, using a couple of cultural bridges to help his listeners understand the worldview he was communicating. He even held off. He was so provoked by their idolatry, but he didn't start in with a judgment and wrath on them for being idolaters. Having taken a step back, he still brought his message all the way forward to the claim that Jesus Christ is the judge of all, that his historical resurrection from the dead proves this, and then inviting the Athenians to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus.

Paul rejects the Athenian ability to develop a true worldview based on their cultural traditions and logical reasoning. He calls them ignorant, these philosophers. He is not saying they are stupid or that they're uneducated. Paul recognizes that human beings have three very significant, insurmountable problems. One, even if we had perfect reasoning, we lack information, particularly information about the nature of the spiritual realm. There is so much that we just don't know and can't seem to get at. Second, we have flawed reasoning. We are morally depraved. Our minds and hearts are darkened. So even if we did have all the right information, we would not be able to interpret it correctly. Third, we are part of the experiment. We are not objective, scientific observers. We exist inside the system. We cannot look from outside in. So, by definition, we are ignorant, and we can't overcome that.

If we are going to have accurate knowledge about God, about the spiritual realm, about moral behavior, about our own nature, about life eternal, then God must communicate those truths to us. And we must be willing to hear. The Jews of Thessalonica had the revealed Word of God, but they refused to listen to the newly revealed Word about Jesus Christ and evaluate that Word according to

the Scriptures they possessed. The men of Athens pride themselves in their own mythological culture and in their ability to reason out truth philosophical.

It was the believers of Berea who provided for us the noble way. They accepted their own limitations, recognizing that if it is at all possible to know about God, and salvation, the purpose of humankind, then it must be God himself who reveals that truth to us. So, they eagerly searched the Scripture to understand the Gospel message Paul proclaimed to them.

Follow-up: Differing response (32-34)

When we consider the last three verses of chapter 17, the follow-up to Paul's message, we might think at first that Paul made a mistake moving so quickly to the repentance and the resurrection with this particular audience. "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer." Some of Paul's ideas were immediately discounted as foolishness by members of the Areopagus. But if we were to judge the nature of our Gospel presentation only by the part of the crowd that sneers, we would find ourselves constantly insecure and apologetic about our claims. There are always going to be people who sneer, and mock, and reject, and get bored, and turn away. Paul's honest declaration of Gospel truth did bring about mockery from some. But it also had this effect.

"Others said, 'We shall hear you again concerning this.' So Paul went out of their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them."

We have a message for the marketplace of human society; for the philosophers, the politicians, the businesswomen, the store clerks, the jailers, the slaves, the priests, the educated, the uneducated, the Jews, the Greeks, the barbarians. We have a responsibility to proclaim that message the best way we can so that it might be correctly understood, and then bringing that message forward to the problem of sin, the solution of the cross, and an invitation for everyone to repent and believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 17:1-15. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. How does Luke describe the activity of Paul in Thessalonica?
3. How do the Thessalonians try to twist the message of Paul to make it a political message?
4. What pitfalls do you see in your own culture of people on the left and right making the gospel of Jesus more political?
5. Read Acts 17:16-34. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What misunderstanding is Paul correcting in his speech before the philosophers of Athens?
7. How does this speech by Paul compare to his speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch in chapter 13?
8. What principles do you see suggested here for sharing the gospel with people who have a very different worldview than the worldview of the Bible?
9. The Bereans are presented as a positive model in contrast both to the conservative Jews of Thessalonica and the philosophically open of Athens. How would you phrase in your own words the nobility or wisdom of the Bereans? And how do you see that wisdom applying to you in your culture?