

Outline

1. Paul begins to teach
 1. Alone in the city, waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive (Acts 17:15-16)
 2. He is “provoked” by the idolatry
 3. Begins his teaching in the synagogue
2. Taken to Mars’ Hill
 1. Debates in the marketplace lead to two opinions
 1. Paul as babblers
 2. Paul as “proclaimer of foreign gods”
 2. Brought to a place where more might hear him
3. Sermon on Mars’ Hill
 1. Introduction centered the altar “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”
 2. Properties of God
 1. Created the world & everything in it
 2. Does not dwell in temples
 3. Has no need for us to fulfill
 3. What God has done
 1. Created the nations
 2. Determined their times and bounds
 4. What God desires
 1. Men should seek him
 2. Men should repent
 5. Coming judgment
 1. The judge identified
 2. Proof of the appointment offered
4. Responses
 1. Some mocked
 2. Others offered to hear more

3. Some joined Paul and believed

Commentary

Paul was apparently content to wait for Silas and Timothy to arrive but seeing rampant idolatry in Athens so provoked his spirit that he could not remain silent. He then begins to speak both in the synagogues and the marketplaces.

The Areopagus was not merely a place where people gathered to engage in friendly argument and debate. It was the place where the city magistrates gathered. According to the Enhanced Strong's Lexicon, the word which translated "conversed" in the ESV (or "encountered" in the KJV) means "*1a* to converse. *1b* to bring together in one's mind, confer with one's self. *1c* to come together, meet. ***1c1* to encounter in a hostile sense. *1c2* to fight with one. *1c3* to bring together of one's property, to contribute, aid, help**" (emphasis added). Thus, there might be another reason why Paul is brought there: to stand before the city magistrates and given an account of himself. What would be at stake here, given the Acts 17:21, is not Paul's life, but perhaps the leave of the magistrates to speak in the city in a scene more friendly, but perhaps not entirely unlike that seen in Thessalonica.

Paul's sermon here is one of the more important incidents found in Acts. It provides much to instruct us in how to reach out to other people.

First, while Paul's goal is to speak to them about things with which they are not familiar, he begins by talking about things with which they ARE familiar. They were familiar with the various altars in the city. Many, or even most of them, would have had passing familiarity with the altar to "the unknown God."

Many in the ancient world had a view of their gods as little more than children with infinite power. Here is one example from Homer's *Iliad* (taken from the delightfully named *The Iliad of Homer. Rendered into English Prose for the Use of Those Who Cannot Read the Original*):



[Ares] showed Zeus the immortal blood that was flowing from his wound, and spoke piteously, saying, "Father Zeus, are you not angered by such doings? We gods are continually suffering in the most cruel manner at one another's hands while doing a favor for mortals; and we all owe you a grudge for having begotten that mad termagant ("harsh-tempered or overbearing woman" - MLC) of a daughter, who is always committing outrage of some kind. We other gods must all do as you bid us, but her you neither scold nor punish; you encourage her because the pestilent creature is your daughter. See how she has been inciting proud Diomedes to vent his rage on the immortal gods. First he went up to the Cyprian and wounded her in the hand near her wrist, and then he sprang upon me too, equal to a daimôn ("demon" - MLC). Had I not run for it I must either have lain there for long enough in torments among the ghastly corpses, or have been eaten alive with spears till I had no more strength left in me."

Zeus looked angrily at him and said, "Do not come whining here, Sir Facing-bothways. I hate you worst of all the gods in Olympus, for you are ever fighting and making mischief. You have the intolerable and stubborn spirit of your mother Hera: it is all I can do to manage her, and it is her doing that you are now in this plight: still, I cannot let you remain longer in such great pain; you are my own off-spring, and it was by me that your mother conceived you; if, however, you had been the son of any other god, you are so destructive that by this time you should have been lying lower than the Titans." (Homer, 5.870-898).

Notice the whining, claims of favoritism, and name-calling in this conversation between two gods. Thus, the Greeks were much afraid that one god may notice a lack of worship and take vengeance.

Paul starts with what they know: That there is that which they do not know. He then

explains that the true God has no need of temples or sacrifice. Rather, God gave everything (“life and breath and everything”), and established the nations and their boundaries “that they should seek God.” Paul is proclaiming that the God that they do not know is the God who wants to be known. And, rather than being “a child with infinite power,” he is a loving provider.

By quoting a Greek poet saying that “we are indeed his offspring,” Paul sets up the end argument against idolatry: If we are his offspring, then it should make no sense for the substance of God to be something that we create (“gold or silver or stone”).

Finally, he ends by stating his call to action: “God now commands all men everywhere to repent.” This is not an idle thought on God’s part. Rather, God makes this call because judgment is coming. Paul identifies the judge, but by attribute (“raising him from the dead”) and not by name (Jesus).

Finally, we see three responses:

1. Some mocked Paul over the resurrection of the dead. There is a reason why Paul refers to the preaching of the risen Christ as “foolishness” or “folly” (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).
2. Some either refused to make up their minds or only pretended to have interest in what he had to say. They would seem rather like Felix, who wanted to wait for a more convenient time.
3. Some believed and joined Paul. Luke tells us that Paul “went out from their midst” after referencing the first two groups. But, this last group continued on with him.

Thought questions

Consider the following thought questions:

1. What would it take for our spirits to be so provoked within us that we would begin to speak out at the error which surrounds us?
2. How serious do you think those who bring Paul to the Areopagus are about actually learning

anything concerning what he has to say? Why?

3. How important are both Jesus and the resurrection to Paul's lesson?
4. Which part of Paul's sermon makes the biggest impact to your mind and way of thinking?
5. What lessons can we take away from Paul's sermon that will help us in spreading the gospel to others?