

Acts 17:16-34

Paul and the Philosophers

Introduction: Acts is the history of the earliest Christians. It's authentic Christianity - it's how we 2,000 years later know the real thing. As the church we've picked up so much baggage and garbage over the years.. We need to continually recalibrate ourselves to God's Word and to authentic Christianity and there is no better place to do that than to look at the first Christians in the book of Acts. We've been following the outline of Acts as God's good news of making everything new through Jesus makes it's way from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth.

We've come to Paul in Athens engaging with the philosophers..

Athens was not just a major metropolis in the ancient world it was the Roman Empire's intellectual, literary, and artistic hub as well. It boasted of it's rich philosophical tradition inherited from Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. It truly was the cultural capital of the ancient world.

Paul the Apostle, as far as we know, did not have plans to minister in Athens - He was called by the Holy Spirit to the region of Macedonia. It was actually rioting in Thessalonica and Berea, brought on by Paul's preaching and teaching against Idols and for the worship of the one true God through the work of Jesus Christ, that sent him to Athens. He was actually there just waiting for his travel companions to join him.. It's fascinating to see that though Paul did not have any strategic plans for that city, Jesus obviously did. From looking at Paul's time in Athens - this cultural hub of the ancient world - what can we learn about Christian engagement with culture? What should the response of Christians be who live in a city or culture that is dominated by non-christian ideologies and religion? A culture that is aesthetically beautiful, artistically and culturally sophisticated but spiritually and morally dead? Let's look at it!

1. What Paul saw -

1. **“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city.”**

2. Paul was in Athens more or less as a tourist. Obviously Paul had heard stories of Athens and its culture his whole life, being an intellectual himself. But as Paul wandered around the city he saw that the city was “full of Idols.” The term in Greek literally means that this city was under them - or we would say it was smothered in Idols. There were temples, and altars everywhere and dedicated to every deity you can imagine...Athena, Zeus, Pan, Jupiter, Saturn, Apollo, the whole Greek pantheon, all the gods of Olympus.. tribal gods.. and these temples and altars were elaborate - they were made from pure gold and silver, ivory and marble.. it was very incredibly aesthetically beautiful, magnificent even, but it was morally and spiritually depraved and empty, even oppressive. One ancient writer said, in the city of Athens, “It was easier to find a god, than a man.” The city of Athens, as Paul saw it, was a city “smothered by Idols” - literally, sacrifices and worship to pagan deities were happening on every corner - and all the sexual and bizarre rituals that went along with pagan worship..

2. **What Paul Felt** - it says Paul was "greatly troubled" when he saw that the city was being smothered in Idols. The words “greatly troubled” in Greek carry the idea of anger, grief, and indignation. It is often used to describe Yahweh’s own reaction to idolatry in the Old Testament. Yahweh is constantly being provoked to jealousy, or greatly troubled by the people’s idolatry.

1. **Why is Paul “greatly troubled”?**

1. Paul knows and believes that Yahweh is the only true God who created and sustains all things - therefore he alone deserves all glory, praise and obedience.
2. Idolatry, by definition, is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security. Since idols are something that we create, they can’t save us, give us meaning, or fulfillment.
3. So not only are people not giving God the glory, praise and obedience that he deserves but they are under a yoke of bondage, oppression, slavery to appease these gods that can never fulfill or forgive, and that are not worthy of worship.
4. Read the stories of the gods of Greece - they are wicked, and lack self control, they’re like children with divine power - they were worshiped not because of their beauty or goodness, but for fear

that they would curse and bring wrath down if people didn't. Another fact about idols is that they always take and never give....

5. It should greatly distress us - grieve us -when we see our own city and culture rejecting the worship of Jesus Christ and serving idols. They are living in rebellion to their purpose which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. There is no true rest outside of Christ, there is no true fulfillment outside of Christ.. and when we see people living in darkness and confusion, living lives filled with chaos, having no assurance of preservation or hope in this life, that should break our hearts!!!!
6. John Stott says, that compassion for others, who are alienated, disoriented, and lost should be a high incentive to share the Gospel,. But there is no higher incentive than the glory of Jesus Christ - talk about what he did for us! and how he deserves all the praise and glory

3. What Paul did -

1. **“(Therefore) 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.”**
2. It needs to be noted that Paul didn't just condemn this culture or city, he didn't go in and rebuke them per se, he didn't right them off as too far gone, he didn't curse and swear at them, he didn't despair and just weep over it's state.
3. **Paul engaged with them.**
4. It says that he “reasoned” in the synagogue and in the market place and with the stoic and epicurean philosophers. From this greek word we get our english word dialogue. Paul didn't just preach to these people, or give a lecture or debate, using prepared talking points. He dialoged with them. He listened to their philosophies and asked questions, he shared the good news and people were able to object and ask questions. it was a going back and forth, respectfully hearing one another out.
5. This also shows that Christianity is not an inferior philosophy to these philosophies though the stoics and epicureans mocked it - the smartest people in the world in about 20 - 50 years time held to and believed the gospel -all the intellectuals were Christians in just a few

years time. Why? This should give us great hope - the world that gospel first went out into is so similar towards ours in it's view of money, sex, power, religious plurality and yet the Gospel spread like wild fire all throughout the world!

6. Paul went to the synagogue - and dialoged with Jews and God fearers. He also went to the Agora - the marketplace. This was were you talked politics, market value and commerce, religion and all matters of social life. They didn't have news papers in those days and so this is where you got your local and empire news.
7. So Paul doesn't just hang out on the fringe, only talking to jews and god fearers, but he goes head on with this culture and engages with it's philosophies.

4. **What Paul said -**

1. Paul is heard by some stoic and epicurean philosophers and is invited to share with the Areopagus - One commentator said this is like all the Ivy League schools plus Oxford and Cambridge all rolled into one - this was the intelligentsia of the ancient world - can you imagine how intimidating this would be?
2. It needs to be noted that Paul was not necessarily welcomed, or received by this group - some are interested in what he had been saying about Jesus and the resurrection, while other call him a babbler - this was a derogatory term that referred to a seed picking or scavenging bird that would gather so many seeds or food that he lost most of them before he got back to his nest or it carried ideas of an animal that fed on trash. The idea is that Paul has no consistency, and has just picked up a bunch of philosophies that don't fit together and has no original thoughts. In modern times we would say someone is a parrot, a charlatan, or a plagiarist.
3. explain stoic and epicurean thought -
 1. Stoics acknowledged a supreme god but in a pantheistic way, confusing him with the 'world soul' (the way modern spiritual people talk about the universe). They saw the world as determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency.

2. To oversimplify, it was characteristic of stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission, and the endurance of pain - don't love anything too much - detach yourself.
3. The Epicureans considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on human affairs. The world was due to chance, atoms colliding and exploding into life, there would be no survival of death, and no final judgment.
4. To oversimplify -Epicureans emphasize chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure - life really has no meaning so live completely for your self and your own pleasure - usually expressed and encouraged with sexual exploration...
5. So how does Paul engage the gospel with both of these philosophies ? First he connects to one of their own altars - the unknown God - Paul is going to talk about their own acknowledgment of their ignorance - to their self proclaimed agnosticism.

1. **God is the Creator of the universe and the sustainer of Life: "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need."**

1. In contrast to both Epicureans and Stoics Paul shows that God is both the personal Creator of everything that exists and the personal Lord of everything he has made. It is absurd then to think that he who made everything and supervises everything lives in localized buildings that humans built. - any attempt to limit or localize God, to imprison him within the confines of manmade buildings, structures or concepts, any attempt to control or sustain him through sacrifice is idolatry and delusional. Paul presents a God bigger than they ever imagined, a God that cannot be controlled or tamed, a God that is completely self sufficient, yet sustains all things freely..
1. I've mentioned the idea before about a "Stepford God", a God you totally understand and agree with on everything is not the real God but a god that you have created that actually acts and thinks exactly as you do... but that is

not a God worthy of worship, or a God that can be trusted with everything and anything... that is a small God. Many of us are guilty of this, and this is why our lives are riddled with fear and anxiety, we don't have a God big enough to account for human pain and suffering, to account for evil - This is not the God of Scripture the God of scripture - beyond our understanding turns all evil on its head and will use everything, all evil, chaos, sin, and destruction for our good and his glory! That is a big God. A God to whom we can say along with Job, The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.".. and though he slay me, yet I will trust him."

2. "If God were small enough to be understood, He would not be big enough to be worshipped. - Evelyn Underhill

2. **God is the ruler of all nations and father of all human beings: "From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. ²⁷ "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' ²⁹ And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone."**

1. Paul shows that this God is bigger than they've ever imagined yet at the same time more personal and closer than they ever dare believe - Although God is not responsible for the tyranny, sin, evil and aggression we see in the world, history and the geography of each nation and individual are ultimately under his control. And though Paul is not teaching a kind of universalism of salvation he wants them to recognize that in terms of creation God is the Father of all humankind, and all are his offspring, creatures that he made, receiving their life from him.

2. In this point Paul quotes their own philosophers and poets - not to that they're right on track but to show that they aren't far off in some of the theological and philosophical concepts they've arrived at in their own culture....Paul is doing what we've talked about many times in our series through Acts - which is to connect the stories and meta narrative of the culture to Jesus. To show how all the hopes and longings of a culture or a people can only find their resolution in Jesus Christ.
 1. Paul is basically saying that you believe that we are the offspring of God, "in him we live and move and have our being," but if your experience and longings don't match with your premise of a far off deistic, or pantheistic view of God and the world, why not change your premise?? They aren't being intellectual honest or consistent.
 2. Even in our own culture we are so passionate about human dignity, rights and equality. We are so passionate about love, and acceptance. Yet the worldview that most of our culture holds to is not one of love, dignity, equality, and honor, but one of an impersonal universe, one of a struggle of power and chaos - quite similar to what the greeks believed about the universe that it was all an endless war and struggle among the gods and humans are caught in the middle of all of it.
 1. Listen to this - "Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. ... I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seemed to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down. Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine or either of us about the robin's... We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a wit." - Annie Dillard - Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

2. See if human beings have not been made in the image of God then human rights and equality is just a pipe dream. It's just one person or one cultures ideas against another. There is no transcendent or outside authority or morality to appeal to. But people believe with all their hearts, and fight with all their might for human rights and equality for all while rejecting the idea of being created by God - they are therefore being intellectually dishonest and this is what Paul is pointing out.
3. This very topic is a huge opportunity for individual christians and the church, in the spheres of culture that God has called us to, to speak into the lives of those around us, to dialogue and to graciously show the inconsistencies of the practice, experience and worldview of our culture - and to show how the biblical doctrines of Creation, Fall, redemption, and restoration that we find in scripture is not just a better narrative but also connects with our heart longings and experiences as well. To show God as our majestic creator who creates a world in love and endows humans with dignity, honor, equality, who makes them not as slaves but co-laborers in his making the world his kingdom..and who ultimately redeems them when it all goes wrong due to human rebellion.
3. But how do we really know that God is the creator and sustainer, that he is near and not far, that he will judge and set the world right??? We can only know through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is both history and fact.
3. **God is the judge of the world - "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. ³¹ For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."**

4. The Scriptures teach again that God is not only Creator, sustainer and Sovereign Lord over all things but that he is also the judge. One day God will judge all evil, reward all righteousness and right all wrong. one day God is going to set everything straight. God has already set the date and appointed the judge - Jesus Christ.
5. Up to this point in Paul's speech it is somewhat relative - Creation, the fall, redemption and restoration might sound better than other religious or philosophical questions but how can we really know? But then Paul introduces the Resurrection of Jesus Christ - as a fact of history which everyone has to deal with - because that was the one day in history where everything went backwards, where God intervened in time and history like never before, where God was seen as supreme creator, sustainer and ruler, yet near and so personal. It was the day when God reversed what had happened to every human being since the fall -death. That day, Jesus, rose from the dead, which is affirmed by many infallible proofs (if you haven't read about the evidence, you need to - The resurrection of the Son of God by NT Wright), and it changed history -
6. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead has huge implications.
 1. Romans 1:3-4 says, **“Concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.** - the resurrection affirms Christ deity.
 2. This changes everything, if Jesus in fact rose from the dead, it is proof that He is God, therefore, he should be feared, worshipped, obeyed, and believed upon for salvation.If Jesus Christ rose from the dead, than he is not to be compared with the other great men of earth, Jesus is unique. He is not on an equal playing field with, Mohammed, Vishnu, Buddha or any other icon or religious leader, because He alone has risen from the dead! He alone is the way to eternal life. -Each person that we interact with in our lives and our city, at some point and time

has to deal with the fact of Jesus' resurrection - You can either believe the evidence or reject it, what you cannot be is neutral.

3. "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead." -Tim Keller

Conclusion: It says, **"When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." ³³ That ended Paul's discussion with them, ³⁴ but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them."**

How or why would we engage with our culture, we will be mocked, scorned, derided, rejected, it will be painful, it might cost our reputation or our pockets... Paul endured all this, they mocked him, most rejected him, called him names. But it was nothing compared to what our savior endured for us...he endured mocking, and beatings, scourging, and crucifixion all in order to bring God's good news of rescue to us... May God cause us to see our city the way Paul saw Athens, to feel for those around us as Paul felt toward those who were worshipping idols and separated from life in Christ, may God also give us the boldness, and humility to dialogue with others and to boldly share christ and connect him to each and every persons story and as the answer to our soul longings!