

## **Acts 17:16-34**

Paul left Berea with some new believers but left Timothy and Silas behind to establish the church. The new believers escorted him to Athens. Athens was the cradle of Greek education and culture. If he came in through the six mile long wall that surrounded the city at one of the northwestern gates the Hellenistic architecture would have made a big impression. As he traveled to the center of the city, he'd have seen The Temple of Hephaestus and the Parthenon on the top of the Acropolis like a crown. It's columns were 34 foot high with a six foot diameter. Peeking within through the columns you could see the 39 foot high statue of Athena. The Acropolis was a limestone plateau of about 1000 by 500 feet. It rose 512 feet above the rest of the city. On his way to the Acropolis, he would have passed through the agora, the Greek marketplace. In the market place was a 40 foot tall octagonal structure, the Horologion. It was a giant water clock and sundial.

16 Everywhere Paul looked he would encounter something dedicated to one of the many gods worshipped in the city. Athens was the definition of pluralism. Paul had seen idolatry before, but not on such a grand and permeating scale.

17 As usual, Paul went straight to the synagogue to begin his outreach. This time though, he also tries to speak to people in the market place. Again we have the word "reasoned" *dialogomai* from which we get the word dialogue. Jewish burial inscriptions have been discovered from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. to the 3<sup>rd</sup> A.D. but the majority being in the same century as Paul's visit.

18 While speaking in the marketplace, Paul encountered the two main groups of philosophers, Stoics and Epicureans. The Stoics derived their name from the painted colonnade, *stoa poikile*. Their founder was Zeno (340 – 265 B.C.) His teaching focused on moral earnestness. They were pantheistic materialists.

The Epicurians were founded by Epicurius (340-270 B.C.) Though their motto was pleasure, they led fairly a disciplined life style. They were materialists. Their idea of pleasure was health and a mind free of anxiety and pain. True pleasure was finding the motivation and truth that was the foundation of things. Most Epicurians were upper class educated people.

They called Paul a babblers, *spermologos*. The word meant someone who went around the market picking up scraps, but evolved into meaning someone who picked out bits of different philosophies. We have a lot of those today. They may have misunderstood Paul and thought he was speaking of two gods, Jesus and Anastasis (resurrection). Neither group believed in resurrection or a life after death with any resemblance to our present life.

19-20 Areopagus – Hill of Ares (the Greek god of war) thus the alternate translation, Mars Hill. Just a ravine away from the Acropolis, 378 feet high, it once held the supreme court of ancient Athens. For a time it was the meeting place of the ruling council, but it seems at the time of our study, it was a place of debate.

21 Luke's note here is confirmed by other ancient writings. Philosophy and new ideas and teachings were the past time of Athens.

22 Paul begins the first sermon customized for an audience that has no Jewish belief. Though he refrains from quoting the Old Testament, the sermon is filled with ideas straight out of the Old Testament. Notice how he builds on connecting points without compromising his message. Religious does not necessarily mean anything to do with truth. It can also be translated "superstitious".

23 He took an observation and turned it into a connecting point. We should be watching for connecting points with the culture we are in. The altar to the Unknown God shows that their hearts realized they were missing something. Though this altar has yet to be discovered, several ancient authors refer to it.

24 Paul is pointing to the transcendence of the Creator God. (1Kings 8:27)  
25 God really doesn't need us or our worship. We need Him! (Psalm 50:7-15)

26 Paul abbreviates the Genesis story and declares that God is intimately involved in our lives. This was contrary to both of their philosophies.

(Deuteronomy 32:8) Paul preached Providence over fatalism of the Greeks.

27 He put every human being in the best place for them to see and enter into a personal relationship with God. We don't see the world that way, but God does!

28 This is from a poem by Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.) We can't get away from the omnipresent God. The second quote is from Aratus, a Stoic philosopher who was from Soli not far from Paul's home, Taurus. Paul is not condoning their philosophies but drawing a common point of connection to denounce idolatry.

29 –30 Now the point of contention – That a living God that is intimately involved with our life should not be worshipped as an image in stone. Paul's not holding back, but telling them God demands that we repent and forsake idols.

31 He warns of a day of judgment (Psalm 9:8) and says the proof that this will take place is the resurrection of the judge, Jesus. (John 5:22,27,30)

32-34 The response wasn't great, possibly because the Greeks saw the body as the basest part of our being and therefore saw resurrection as something undesirable. Some did believe and it may have been enough to start a small house church. We don't have a Biblical record of a church in Athens but a later document states that Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens.(Eusebius)