

Abounding Grace Christian Church

The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Church – Part 54

I. Exposition of Chapter Seventeen (Continued).

A. Verses 15-34 - Paul's Ministry to Athens.

1. Verse 15 – “So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.” – So, some of the other believers helped Paul escape out of Berea and he goes to Athens, Greece which was about 250 miles. According to Dr. Bob Utley, Athens was:

“...the greatest city of Greece’s past cultural heritage and still the intellectual center of the Roman world. It was steeped in tradition, superstition and immorality.”¹

2. Verse 16 – “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.” – When it mentions Paul’s “spirit” here, it’s important to remember that it’s our spirit, the inner most part of us, which is a “new creation” (II Corinthians 5:17) and has been joined to the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:17). The idolatry that surrounded Paul caused a grieving in his spirit (cf. Ephesians 4:30). The word “provoked” here means; “to be provoked or upset at someone or something involving severe emotional concern”²

3. Verse 17 – “Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the *Gentile* worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.” – We see here, once again, that Paul went first into the synagogue. But, it seems that he was so concerned about the pagan idolatry outside the synagogue that every day he would go out and reason with the idol worshippers who were in the marketplace. Grant Osborne asserts:

“Paul’s ministry plan is interesting. In most towns he would go to the Jewish synagogues and spend some time there and only then go into the agora, or marketplace. Here, however, he proclaims the gospel in both at the same time, probably in the synagogues on Sabbaths and then in the marketplace during the week, reaching out to Jews, God-fearers, and Greeks together.”³

4. Verse 18 – “Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.”

- a. “...Epicurean and Stoic philosophers...” – These two groups of philosophers were very different in their ideologies.

- 1) **Epicureans** – Epicurus founded a school in Athens around 300 BC. His philosophy was that of I Corinthians 15:32 – “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” They denied any future judgment or that God has any hand in any present actions. There is no after life so when you’re dead, you’re dead, so enjoy the present. They emphasized pleasure.

- 2) **Stoics** - A man by the name of Zeno founded this philosophy around the same time (300 BC). Dr. Thomas Constable states:

“His followers placed great importance on living in harmony with nature. They stressed individual self-sufficiency and rationalism, and they had a reputation for being quite arrogant. Stoics were pantheists, who believed that God is in everything, and everything is God. They were also fatalistic. Their teaching is also common today.”⁴

- b. “...encountered him...” – The meaning of the word “encountered” here is: “to express differences of opinion in a forceful way, involving alternative opportunities for presenting contrasting viewpoints”⁵

- c. “What does this babbler want to say?” – The meaning of the word “babbling” is: “a figurative expression, literally ‘one who picks up seed,’ originally a reference to birds picking up seed, but figuratively applied to a person who is an information scavenger)

¹Robert James Utley, *Luke the Historian: The Book of Acts*, vol. Volume 3B, Study Guide Commentary Series (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2003), 205.

²Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 762.

³Grant R. Osborne, *Acts: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 316.

⁴Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Acts* (<http://www.soniclight.com>: Sonic Light Publication, 2019), 349.

⁵Louw and Nida, 437.

one who is not able to say anything worthwhile in view of his miscellaneous collection of tidbits of information”⁶ Dr. Stanley Horton explains:

“Some of these philosophers were quite contemptuous of Paul’s gospel and called him a ‘babbler’ (Gk. *spermologos*, ‘a seed-picker’). This term was also used as slang for parasites and ignorant plagiarists who picked up scraps of information from others and presented them as their own. Then, because Paul preached ‘the good news about Jesus and the resurrection,’ they said he seemed to be proclaiming ‘foreign gods.’”⁷

d. “...‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.” – They possibly had never heard of Jesus and, to them, the idea of a resurrection was totally foreign to them.

5. Verses 19-20 – “And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.’”

a. “...the Areopagus...” – The New Bible Dictionary explains:

“The Council of the Areopagus, so called because the hill of Ares was its original meeting-place. In NT times, except for investigating cases of homicide, it met in the ‘Royal Porch’ (*stoa basileios*) in the Athenian market-place (*agora*), and it was probably here that Paul was brought before the Areopagus (Acts 17:19)...It was the most venerable institution in Athens, going back to legendary times, and, in spite of the curtailment of much of its ancient powers, it retained great prestige, and had special jurisdiction in matters of morals and religion. It was therefore natural that ‘a preacher of foreign divinities’ (Acts 17:18) should be subjected to its adjudication.”⁸

6. Verse 21 – “For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” – This can be good in one sense in that a person wants to hear truth. But, in another sense, this can be dangerous. There are a lot of people who want to hear the latest “new thing” who get into trouble when they begin to believe everything that comes along. Paul warned about these kinds of things in **II Timothy 4:2-4**.

7. Verses 22-31 – Paul preaches to the Athenians.

a. Verses 22-23 – “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: **TO THE UNKNOWN GOD**. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:’” – In his opening statement, Paul, by the leading and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, takes something from their own culture, namely, “**To the Unknown God**” and uses it as a platform upon which to preach Jesus Christ! Warren Wiersbe writes:

“Paul’s message is a masterpiece of communication. He started where the people were by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown god. Having aroused their interest, he then explained who that God is and what He is like. He concluded the message with a personal application that left each council member facing a moral decision, and some of them decided for Jesus Christ.”⁹

b. Verses 24-25 – “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.” – This is a different strategy than what Paul would take in the synagogues with the Jews and Gentile proselytes. He didn’t go to the Scriptures because the pagans didn’t know the Scriptures. Instead he appealed to what is called “**general revelation**.” This is referring to creation declaring that there is a Creator. (cf. **Romans 1:20**).

⁶Low and Nida, 431.

⁷Stanley M. Horton, *Acts: A Logion Press Commentary* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2001), 297-298.

⁸F. F. Bruce, “Areopagus,” ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 79.

⁹Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 472-473.