

Making Known the Unknown God: Paul in Athens

Session Thirteen

Paul is smuggled out of Thessalonica to Berea, then on to Athens. But Silas and Timothy remain in Berea for a while. What prevents Paul from returning to Thessalonica? Compare 1 Thess. 2:8 and Acts 17:9.

Paul writes 2 Thessalonians from Athens in AD 52.

Paul writes 1 Thessalonians from Corinth in AD 52/53.

What did you notice in reading these two letters in the context of Paul's 2nd missionary journey?

Acts 17:16-21

What makes Athens so great?

- foremost Greek city-state
- rich philosophical tradition: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle
- extensive art, impressive architecture and literature
- the Roman Empire's "intellectual metropolis" (p. 276)

Athens honored many gods including Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana, Aesculapius. The whole Greek pantheon (gods of Olympus) was there too. The images of the gods were made not only of stone and brass, but gold, silver, ivory and marble by the finest Greek sculptors. There were so many idols and gods in Athens that the historian Xenophon referred to Athens as "one great altar, one great sacrifice" (p. 277).

This is Paul's first time in Athens. And he's alone. Note Paul's emotional reactions to viewing such an idolatrous city (v. 16).

Epicureans—happiness is the supreme good, not mere momentary pleasure or temporary gratification; but it later degenerated into a more sensual system of thought (CSSB, 1691)

Sheryl Crow: "If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad."

Stoics—taught people should live according to nature, recognize own self-sufficiency and independence and suppress their own desires; later became a system of pride (CSSB, 1691)

Seneca: "True happiness is...to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future."

"There's one blessing only, the source and cornerstone of beatitude -- confidence in self."

What is the Areopagus? pagos = ares =

It was located just to the northwest of the Acropolis. It was the place where the _____ of ancient Greece once met. In Paul's day, its legal authority was diminished. It was more like a council that oversaw the city's religion, morals and education.

Would a university setting be the best parallel to the Areopagus, if any? Can you think of other Mars Hill places?

“There is an urgent need for more Christian thinkers who will dedicate their minds to Christ, not only as lecturers, but also as authors, journalists, dramatists, and broadcasters, as TV script writers, producers and personalities, as artists and actors who use a variety of art forms in which to communicate the gospel” (p. 281).

Acts 17:22-34

Analyze Paul's message. What is the main content? What is his approach?

Whom does Paul quote? (Note: he will also quote Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33 and from Epimenides in Titus 1:12).

“All idolatry tries to minimize the gulf between the Creator and his creatures, in order to bring him under our own control. More than that, it actually reverses the respective positions of God and us, so that, instead of our humbly acknowledging that God has created and rules us, we presume to imagine that we can create and rule God” (287).

Paul wins some converts—a council member named _____, a woman named _____ and some others.

How does Paul's example inspire us to tailor and deliver the Gospel to a postmodern world?

Comment: “Why is it that, in spite of the great needs and opportunities of our day, the church slumbers peacefully on, and that so many Christians are deaf and dumb, deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied to testimony? I think the major reason is this: we do not speak as Paul spoke because we do not feel as Paul felt...Divine jealousy has not stirred within us” (290).

Final thoughts, questions, comments...