

Chapter 44: Drawing Near to the Far Off

Acts 17:16–21

Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17 is very similar to many of the journeys he and the other missionaries have made to different areas. He arrives, he begins evangelizing in the synagogue and with others in the area, and he ultimately shares the gospel to a broad group of people. Yet, there are major differences to this section in the way that the Athenians are such thoroughgoing Gentile pagans. Yet, for as much as Paul is distressed over the idolatry of the city, he does not turn away from them, but rather moves closer to them to share with them the gospel of Jesus. In this, Paul's example sets a precedent for us to follow in our own contexts: *draw near to those who are far off*.

Far Off (Acts 17:16)

As Paul awaits Silas and Timothy (v. 16a; see Acts 17:15), he walks through the great, ancient city of Athens. If Paul were merely a tourist on vacation, there was hardly a better city for him to visit, since "Athens was known the world over for its magnificent art and architecture."¹ Yet, Paul's reaction was not characterized by admiration for this city and its extraordinary history of philosophical, mathematical, scientific, and cultural achievements. Rather, as he walked through the city, "his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (v. 16b). Bruce explains that we might today admire Athens as nothing more than art, but "in the first century of our era they were not viewed simply as works of art: they were temples and images of pagan deities."² Calvin writes, "the city, which was the mansion-house of wisdom, the fountain of all arts, the mother of humanity, did exceed all others in blindness and madness."³

The word that Luke chooses to describe Paul's reaction is probably "too gentle" to translate as "greatly distressed," as the NIV has it (ESV: "provoked"): "We get our word 'paroxysm' from it. Paul was 'infuriated' at the sight."⁴ Bock notes that this is a word used in the Old Testament to describe God's own "anger at idolatry" in both Isaiah 65:3 ("a people who *provoke* me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks") and Hosea 8:5 ("My anger *burns* against them").⁵ Paul may have had to count as loss some of his Jewish upbringing and Pharisaical training in order to follow Christ (Phil. 3:4–11), but he retained an ingrained sense of outrage at idolatry from the ongoing moral demands of the First and Second Commandments.⁶

¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 366.

² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 349.

³ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:146.

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 366. BDAG suggests that the verb in Acts 17:16 suggests an inward arousal of spirit "by anger, grief, or a desire to convert them" (BDAG, παραξύνω, 780).

⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 560, citing Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 512.

⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 349.

It is interesting to reflect upon the fact that we have not seen Paul outraged or infuriated by his interactions with the Jews, in spite of their persistent unbelief and persecution against him (see, however, Paul's annoyance at the demon-possessed slave girl in Acts 16:18). Yet, we should also notice that Paul does not treat the Athenians poorly on the basis of his outrage over their idolatries. With these pagan Greeks, as with the Jews he encountered, Paul is patient to teach them the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In both cases, the sins are aggravated by spurning the revelation that each group has received: for Jews, in spurning the special revelation to God's covenant people, and for idolaters, in spurning the natural revelation manifested in God's creative power.⁷

Yet, while the actions and artifacts of this society provoke Paul to outrage over what he sees, his response is to get to work bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is instructive for today, especially for those of us living in or around large cities. It is right for us to experience anger, grief, or outrage at the pagan wickedness of the world. It is very important, though, to learn from the psychology of Paul's *affections* here. Paul Helm writes this:

The cardinal affections are said to be joy, fear, hope, and grief. All affections are variants of one or other or combinations of these four. The objective of the reason is to modulate such feelings in line with Christian virtues and to make the virtues more achievable. This involves the making of the expression of feelings or emotions fitting and proportionate to the states of affairs that generate them, to prevent them reaching such a pitch that they cloud the judgment or affect the states of the body.⁸

Notice how these four cardinal affections are really two pairs of opposites: joy pairs with grief, and hope pairs with fear. That is, there are affections that *incline* us toward certain things (joy, hope), and there are affections that repel, repulse, or *disincline* us (grief, fear).⁹ On the one hand, Paul was *repelled*, *repulsed*, and *disinclined* from the idolatry of Athens. On the other hand, we should notice that the anger/grief/irritation that Paul experienced motivated him with a desire to convert those who were lost in these sins. Here we see a disgust on the basis of love for the glory of God matched with love/pity/compassion for the good of the lost and the glory of Christ in salvation. As Lenski writes, "The glory he saw was utter shame. He was in no way humbled and abashed by the pride of this pagan flowering; he was only aroused to set the glory of God and of Christ where the glory of idolatry now spread itself."¹⁰

Drawing Near (Acts 17:17–21)

In the last passage, Luke directly acknowledged the pattern that we have come to observe:

⁷ On the aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others, see *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #151.

⁸ Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 97.

⁹ See Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 24–26.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 708.

namely, that Paul's practice of going first to the synagogues of the Jews was "his custom" (Acts 17:2). Here again in v. 17a, we read that Paul "reasoned in the synagogues with the Jews and the devout persons." Importantly, the sentence starts with a conjunction that draws a conclusion from the previous verse: "So, he reasoned in the synagogue...."¹¹ Peterson suggests two reasons for Paul's action of going to the synagogue as a response to the idolatry he saw in the city: "In the synagogue he met with those who shared his distress about false religion. But Paul also knew that the gospel would empower believing Jews to have a greater impact on the idolatry of the pagan world because it was a message of grace and salvation for everyone on the same basis (cf. 13:46–48; 15:11)."¹² Both of these reasons essentially point to the same goal: to strengthen God's covenant people in the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in order that they might bear more effective witness to the surrounding, pagan world. Here, perhaps more than we see elsewhere, we have a glimpse into Paul's strategy of reaching God's covenant people with the gospel of Jesus in order to unleash them to reach their pagan neighbors with that same gospel.

Paul, however, does not focus exclusively on the Jews in Athens: "So 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" (v. 17). In that marketplace, Luke informs us explicitly that he held conversations with "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (v. 18a). Many scoffed at him ("What does this babblers wish to say?"; v. 18b), while others misunderstood him: "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" (v. 18c). Yet, even their misunderstandings stemmed from the fact that Paul was preaching the same gospel that he had everywhere: "he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (v. 18d).¹³

The beliefs of these two schools of Greek philosophy are important to understand to frame the approach that Paul takes in his sermon at the Areopagus in the next section. Polhill explains:

Epicureans were thoroughgoing materialists, believing that everything came from atoms or particles of matter. There was no life beyond this; all that was human returned to matter at death. Though the Epicureans did not deny the existence of gods, they saw them as totally indifferent to humanity. They did not believe in providence of any sort; and if one truly learned from the gods, that person would try to live the same sort of detached and tranquil life as they, as free from pain and passion and superstitious fears as they.

The Stoics had a more lively view of the gods than the Epicureans, believing very much in the divine providence. They were pantheists, believing that the ultimate divine principle was to be found in all of nature, including human beings. This spark of divinity, which they

¹¹ Lenski translates the word as "accordingly" (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 709).

¹² Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 489.

¹³ "...they used a term of characteristic Athenian slang to describe divinities—he spoke of Jesus and *Anastasis* (the Greek word for 'resurrection') and in the ears of some frequenters of the Agora these two words sounded as if they denoted the personified and deified powers of 'healing' and 'restoration.'" (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 351.)

referred to as the *logos*, was the cohesive rational principle that bound the entire cosmic order together. Humans thus realized their fullest potential when they lived by reason. By reason, i.e., the divine principle within them which linked them with the gods and nature, they could discover ultimate truth for themselves. The Stoics generally had a rather high ethic and put great stock on self-sufficiency. Since they viewed all humans as bound together by common possession of the divine *logos*, they also had a strong sense of universal brotherhood. The mention of these schools is not incidental. Paul would take up some of their thought in his Areopagus speech, particularly that of the Stoics, and thoroughly redirect it in line with the Creator God of the Old Testament.¹⁴

In many ways, the Epicureans represent the spirit of our own age, where naturalistic materialism (the belief that matter is all that exists, denying any spiritual realm beyond what we can see or experience through the senses) has not only dismissed any need for God, but also given way to the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. Of Epicureanism, Lenski writes, “Pleasure, ἡδονή (*hēdonē*), not duty was the substance of this philosophy. The means to attain it was called virtue. This was a doctrine which could not produce anything but selfishness and sensuality when men put it into practice.”¹⁵

We are witnessing modern forms of Stoicism today that have arisen as a reaction to the widespread Epicureanism. Against the grain of the pure pursuit of pleasure in our society, there are many who advocate for various forms of Stoic lifestyles as a more virtuous way of living. These include the modern pursuits for “social justice,” environmental causes, physical health and fitness trends, and even a growing cottage industry dedicated to reviving the teaching of actual Greek Stoics from antiquity. The emphases in these areas are not so much in politics or health *per se*, but in the belief that there is a special kind of knowledge to understand these pursuits, along with a special kind of virtue that can only be gained from strict obedience to these practices. Both of these philosophies attempt to chart a path to success in life apart from a right relationship to God as Creator and Redeemer. For the Epicureans, the gods didn’t matter, and for the Stoics, the gods rewarded virtuous (external) behavior. Both fell far short of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The final verses in this section are transitional into Paul’s sermon, but they are important to set the stage. Lenski points out that the descriptions of Paul’s interactions with these philosophers convey an ongoing discussion, in which Paul’s strange new teaching slowly grows in esteem in their eyes.¹⁶ First, Lenski notes that the word for “reasoned” (v. 17) was in the imperfect tense, conveying ongoing discussions. Second, Lenski notes that the phrase “conversed with” (v. 18) is also in the imperfect tense, literally meaning “were throwing with him,” capturing a vivid, robust, back-and-forth debate between them and Paul. Finally, Lenski observes that all of these imperfect tenses conclude on the aorists (capturing decisive, complete actions) where the many rounds of discussion culminated in how “they took him and brought him to the Areopagus” (v. 19), where they asked to hear more from him.

The exact place of the *Areopagus* has been disputed. There is still a “Hill of Ares” (the Greek god

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 366–67.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 713.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 711.

of war) that you can visit, but there was also a court, or an “administrative body that took its name from this place.”¹⁷ There is a question, then, whether Paul delivers this sermon on a hilltop, or whether he gives a formal defense of his doctrine to the court that oversaw Athens. We will deal more with that question in the next section; however, v. 21 notes that the interests of the people are more curious than anything: “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (v. 21).

Discussion Questions

1. For whom was Paul waiting in Athens (v. 16a; see Acts 17:15)? What did Paul see and experience when he explored Athens while waiting for his fellow missionaries (v. 16b)? What does the word translated as “provoked” mean in the original Greek? Why does Luke use this word to describe Paul’s strong feelings against the idolatry he saw? How does the immorality that surrounds you provoke strong feelings of grief, anger, or disgust?
2. What does the word “so” in v. 17a convey about the connection to Paul’s being “provoked” and his actions in the rest of the section? What is the first place Paul goes after being provoked by the idolatry of Athens (v. 17b)? Why do you think that Paul goes to the Jewish synagogue as a result of seeing the idolatry? How is this approach to the Jewish synagogue different from other approaches to the Jewish synagogue?
3. What does v. 17c suggest about the length and depth of conversations that Paul had with the Greeks he met in the marketplace? Who were the Epicureans (v. 18a)? What groups of people today share their basic outlook and philosophical convictions? Who were the Stoics (v. 18b)? What groups of people today share their basic outlook and philosophical convictions? How did these people scoff at him or misunderstand him (v. 18c)?
4. Why did these groups ultimately take Paul and bring him to the Areopagus (v. 19a)? What do they ask for from him (v. 19b–20)? What does this suggest about the effectiveness of drawing near to those who are far off? What manifestations of sin and immorality provoke you in your spirit? Does the provocation you feel drive you toward, or away from, the people perpetrating those sins? How does Paul’s example challenge you to move toward the lost?

¹⁷ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 492.