

Chapter 45: The Unknown God and the Appointed Man

Acts 17:22–34

Since he had only one shot to preach the gospel in the ancient, venerable city of Athens, Paul's sermon in Acts 17:22–34 is instructive in what he says as well as what he does not say. With deceptive simplicity, Paul simultaneously critiques pagan understandings of creation, history, and the end of history at judgment day, but without ever naming the unknown God. He develops a biblical understanding of time and righteousness, but without ever appealing to Scriptures. He declares the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, but without ever naming him or preaching his crucifixion. Yet, in this sermon, Paul holds out a fundamental truth to the Athenian people: *God will judge the world by an appointed man.*

The Unknown God (Acts 17:22–29)

As we get into Paul's great address at the Areopagus, it is important to differentiate between the *place* called the Areopagus (a hill overlooking Athens that can still be visited) and the *people* who made up the council who took the name. Polhill offers several strong reasons to think that Paul gave this address to the *people* rather than at the *place* sometimes called "Mars Hill."¹ To begin, the whole book of Acts is filled with the normal pattern of personal evangelism that leads to some kind of public witness before an official body. To be sure, there are public addresses to crowds (Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2, in the temple in Acts 4, and to Gentiles in Acts 10; Philip in Samaria in Acts 8; Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy in the various places that the missionaries visit). When that evangelism begins to attract a certain degree of attention, however, the missionaries often must give a specific account to authorities in those areas: Peter and John before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4, 5; Stephen before the Sanhedrin in Acts 6–7; Peter before the church in Jerusalem in Acts 11; Paul and Barnabas before the Jerusalem council in Acts 15; Paul before Felix in Acts 24, and before Agrippa and Festus in Acts 25–26, and awaiting his appeal before Caesar in Acts 28. Additionally, Polhill points to the ultimate conversion of "Dionysius the Areopagite," a member of that council, suggesting that Dionysius was probably present to hear Paul's presentation. Finally, Polhill notes how similar this passage is to the trial of Socrates, in that both are accused of "introducing" (Plato uses the same word as Luke) other gods. There seems to be a clear parallel being drawn in both cases; however, as Polhill notes, "It is probably erroneous to see it as a trial in any formal sense. Paul was not formally charged. Once finished he made an easy exit—there were no deliberations."²

In this great testimony before the Areopagus, it is also likely that we should see a general representation of Paul's testimony before the Gentiles, equivalent to the summary of "Paul's proclamation of the gospel to Jewish and God-fearing audiences" in Pisidia Antioch in Acts 13.³ Here, Paul is building a case toward Christ by arguing from foundational issues that posed

¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 368.

² Polhill, *Acts*, 368.

³ So argues Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 354–55.

stumbling-blocks to his audience. For the Jews, those foundational issues related to their interpretations of prophetic texts related to the Messiah. For the Gentiles, the foundational issues relate to the pagan understanding of creation.⁴ This speech is a marvelous example of interaction with Greek ideas without necessarily conceding their premises and viewpoints.⁵ Paul argues for a biblical understanding of creation by the only living God, and yet he does so through connection points with the Athenians and not by appealing to the “Scriptures as Scriptures.”⁶

To begin, Paul addresses the Athenians with an opening observation: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (v. 22). Speakers were not permitted to “use complimentary exordia when addressing the Areopagus, in hope of securing its goodwill,” and the word “religious” carries the same ambiguity in English so that “religious” might be understood as “superstitious,” which is how the KJV translates this.⁷ That this is a shot across the bow becomes apparent over the course of Paul’s speech; however, the Athenians had to wait to understand what Paul meant by this opening statement.

Next, Paul draws attention to “objects of [their] worship,” including an altar with an inscription “To the unknown god” (v. 23a). As Polhill notes, “ignorance was a cardinal sin” to the Greeks.⁸ Skillfully, Paul touches on themes that play directly into the values and concerns of the society. Yet, he does so to point out a gap in the midst of their prideful philosophies: they worshiped a god they did not know. When Paul says, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (v. 23b), he is not saying that they have really been worshiping the God of the Scriptures this whole time. Rather, he is saying that he will now tell them about the true, living God who exists, whom they have been ignorantly groping for throughout their history.

Although Paul does not provide the name Yahweh, he gives a biblical account of the God of the Bible: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (vv. 24–25). Here, Paul cuts against typical pagan ideas of the creation of the world, describing the God who made “the world and everything in it.” Paul clarifies that this God is not “served by human hands” (v. 25), using the word *θεραπεύεται* (*therapeuetai*), from which we get our word “therapeutic.” Lenski writes that this word “is exactly proper to express the thought intended, rendering someone a service that he needs as the sick man must have the service of a physician. The service of worship: adoration, praise, prayer, petition, is a totally different thing. By it we profit and not God, nor does it supply a need in God.”⁹ God does not need us, but it is we who need him: “since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

From here, Paul then moves to expand out from the beginning of creation to the contemporary situation, where different tribes, languages, peoples, and nations existed throughout the world: “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 369–70.

⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 354–55.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 725–26.

⁷ See Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 355.

⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, 372.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 727.

determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (v. 26). This phrase moves from creation to providence, as God alone is sovereign over seasons and epochs.¹⁰

Yet, though God has been providentially kind toward his creatures, people have not understood it: “that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” (vv. 27–28a). Bock (following Witherington) notes how this statement contrasts with a Stoic conception of God that views people as innately related to God.¹¹ For Stoics, we are already *in* God, whereas the Scriptures demonstrate that we are created by God and sustained by his immanent presence, but that we are nevertheless distinct from him.¹² To illustrate the distinction, Paul cites the poet but draws a surprising conclusion to the Athenians: “Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man” (v. 29).¹³ Bock writes, “The theology behind this idea is that humanity is made in the divine image, which means that human beings are living, animated, conscious beings, not objects like idols. So God must be the same and more.”¹⁴

The Appointed Man (Acts 17:30–31)

At this point in the sermon, Paul shifts from creation and providence to future judgment: “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (vv. 30–31a). The Athenians have been ignorant in relation to God, and there has not yet been retribution. The mercy that they have received from the Lord, however, is not a guarantee of perpetual overlooking. God has overlooked for a time, but now the time has come to command “all people everywhere to repent.”

Paul’s chronological move at this point is interesting. He has moved in a linear fashion from creation to providence, but now he skips over the event that has made the command to repent urgent. Rather than moving to identifying the redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul jumps to the present moment when the command to repent hangs in the air. Then, he moves to the end of time by speaking of the judgment in righteousness that is coming for all the world. Only at the very end of his speech does he return to the event

¹⁰ “It is uncertain whether Paul alludes here to seasons of the various nations’ dominance..., seasons of divine provision of food, national boundaries, land boundaries between land and sea, or some combination....The basic choice is between seasons or years, which look to God’s care, and epochs, which look to God’s ordering the nations....Regardless, the point is God’s sovereignty.” (Bock, *Acts*, 566.)

¹¹ Bock, *Acts*, 568, citing Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 529.

¹² Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 499.

¹³ “The theology behind this idea is that humanity is made in the divine image, which means that human beings are living, animated, conscious beings, not objects like idols. So God must be the same and more.” (Bock, *Acts*, 569, citing H. Conzelmann, *The Acts of the Apostles*, trans. J. Limburg, A. T. Kraabel, and D. H. Juel, ed. E. J. App and C. R. Matthews, *Hermeneia* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 145.)

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that has changed everything: “and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (v. 31b). Yet even here, Paul does not name Jesus Christ. Lenski is probably right when he suggests that Paul is holding this fact in suspense to draw out the interest of his hearers.¹⁵ Another way of understanding this suspense is to recognize the rhetorical emphasis that Paul puts on Jesus by disrupting the pagan understanding of the flow of history but holding back the reason for this disruption.

Mockers and Believers (Acts 17:32–34)

The hearers of Paul respond with mocking to the very point that marked the transformation of time: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked” (v. 32a). Polhill writes:

Epicureans believed in no human existence after death. Stoics believed that only the immaterial spirit survived death. To Greeks the idea of a body surviving death did not make any sense—even a transformed body. So many in the Areopagus simply scoffed at Paul’s reference to the resurrection. As so often with the preaching of the gospel in Acts, however, the response was mixed.¹⁶

In the rhetorical flow of Paul’s sermon, he deliberately withheld the resurrection in the timeline of the sermon in order to put the utmost emphasis on the point; however, many of those listening missed the significance of the resurrection and so mocked it. Yet, even here, “others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’” (v. 32b). After Paul left (v. 33), “some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them” (v. 34). Once again the gospel goes out and is scattered like seed that lands on a variety of soil types. For some, the gospel was immediately snatched away. For others, they expressed some early interest, but do not seem to have gone anywhere with it.

But for this last group, including “Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the twelve judges of the Athenian Court,”¹⁷ the gospel took deep root and produced a hundredfold fruit. The proclamation of the gospel always works, in God’s way and in God’s timing. Paul’s sermon did not convert all of Athens, just as Peter’s preaching did not convert all of Jerusalem. But, the Lord drew his own to himself.

Discussion Questions

1. Where or what is the Areopagus (v. 22a)? To whom is Paul most likely preaching in this sermon? What does Paul mean by “religious” (v. 22b)? What does Paul mean when he references the altar “to the unknown God”? What did the Epicureans believe about the origins of the world? What did Stoics believe about the nature of the world? What does Paul preach about the Creator and providential Sustainer of creation? Why are idols insufficient to image God (v. 29)?

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 738–39.

¹⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, 378.

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 740.

2. What does it mean that God formerly “overlooked” the “times of ignorance” (v. 30a)? To what historical period of time does Paul refer? In what sense were people ignorant? What does it mean to “repent” (v. 30b)? Why do you think that Luke does not record Paul’s speaking about the cross, and instead jumping ahead to the day appointed for judgment (v. 31a)? Why do you think Paul speaks of the “man” God has appointed without naming him or his work (v. 32)?

3. How does the rhetorical structure of Paul’s address highlight the person and work of Jesus Christ, rather than diminishing that gospel declaration? What does Paul accomplish by highlighting the judgment of Jesus Christ rather than his redemption and salvation? Why do you think that he approached this sermon in this way? In what circumstances might you spend more time on creation, providence, and judgment?

4. Why does Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead assure us that he is the righteous man who will judge all the world? What does it mean that God has appointed him to this task? What kind of responses do the Athenians exhibit toward the gospel? Who is Dionysius, and what was his role (v. 34a)? Why do you think Paul mentions “a woman named Damaris” (v. 34)? How far does the gospel reach into Athens?