

In Athens



If someone made a statue of you, what pose would be most appropriate? What inscription?

Scripture Passage

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Bible Study

1. To be noticed by the Greek philosophers of Athens, how extensive was Paul's activity?
2. What previous understanding of Christianity did these philosophers have?
3. The Stoics believed in pantheism while the Epicureans had little or no belief in God. What does Paul emphasize about God (vv. 23-30)? How does Paul use their own culture and ideas to help them see the weaknesses in the way they relate to deity?

4. How is this sermon unlike the one to Jews in 13:16-41? Is not using Scripture here a strength or a weakness? Why? How are the sermons alike in terms of what they teach about Jesus?
5. How does the response in Athens (17:21,32-34) compare with Berea (17:12) and Thessalonica (17:4)?

Reference Notes

17:16 While most people would have been impressed by the artistic beauty of the sculptures found in Athens, Paul was struck by the idolatry it all represented.

17:17 Paul preached not only in the synagogue at Athens, but also in their marketplace where, three centuries before, Socrates likewise debated with anyone who would listen.

17:18 *Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.* Epicurus maintained that a tranquil life free from pain, passions and fears was the highest good for humanity. This could be achieved only by detaching oneself from indulgence and the cares of the world. The Epicureans were practical atheists in that they believed the gods had no interest in humanity and were unknowable. The Stoics had a pantheistic idea of god as the World-Soul. People were a spark of the divine; upon death, one's immortal soul would be absorbed into the divine spirit. The ideal life was one of virtue that refused to give in before the pressures of circumstances and of human passions. **this babbler.** Literally, "seed-picker" & a derisive term stemming from the actions of a bird that picks up seeds wherever it can find them. To the philosophers, Paul seemed like someone who picked up scraps of ideas here and there and then had the audacity to try to teach others. **foreign gods ... Jesus and the resurrection.** Since the Greek word for Jesus sounds something like the Greek name for the goddess of health, and since the Greek word for salvation is also used to speak of physical healing, his listeners thought Paul was talking about two new gods & Health and Resurrection.

17:19 *Areopagus.* Athens was a free city within the Roman Empire, so the Areopagus had legal and judicial authority over what went on in the city. It does not appear Paul himself is on trial (as though he was accused of breaking any laws) as much as his message itself is being evaluated as to its credibility and worth.

17:21 Luke's rather sarcastic observation about the Athenians in general is an echo of what the Greek orator Demosthenes had said 400 years earlier: "You are the best people at being deceived by something new that is said" (Bruce).

17:23 *to an unknown god.* Other writers of the time speak of statues and altars in Athens raised to gods "both known and unknown." The implicit admission of ignorance about God provided Paul with a point of entry for sharing the Gospel.

17:24 Paul asserts that God is both the world's Creator and Sovereign: he is not the uninterested or removed god of Greek philosophy. **does not live in temples.** Solomon recognized this as he dedicated the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:27), but so did Euripides, a Greek philosopher, when he wrote, "What house built by craftsmen could enclose the ... divine within enfolding walls?"

17:25 *he is not served by human hands.* The philosophers would also agree with this. Plato had written, "What advantage accrues to the gods from what they get from us?"

17:27 Challenging the Epicurean assumption that God was unknowable, Paul says God is knowable by those who seek after him. While the Stoics would agree with the nearness of God, the ideas of

his separateness from creation and that one could know God personally would challenge them.

17:28 Paul supports his points by quoting two Greek authors, Epimenides and Aratus. Both are from works about Zeus, and both were interpreted by the Stoics to refer to the Logos, the supreme source of reason and order in the universe. These quotes do not imply Paul is equating Zeus with God, but it does indicate he recognized that God revealed truth about himself even through other religions and philosophies.

17:30 *God overlooked such ignorance.* This reflects the Old Testament notion that sins committed in ignorance are less culpable than those done in defiance.

17:32-34 The converts included Dionysius, a member of the Athenian council. Nothing more is said in the New Testament about Athens so it is unlikely that these believers established a church at the time.

Caring Time

1. What distresses you spiritually about the area in which you live? What specific needs do you see? What do you feel God is calling you to do about it?
2. Whom do you know who has very little, or no background, in the Gospel? Could you share the Gospel with someone without quoting Bible verses? Why or why not?
3. Paul uses idols and Greek poetry as points of contact with these people. What could you use as a point of contact with people today in your efforts to relate the Gospel?