

Paul & the Wisdom of Athens

Acts 17:16-21

By Phillip G. Kayser

A man saw a little league baseball game going on one afternoon. He thought he'd stick around and see how things were going. He walked up to the dugout and asked a boy there what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind." "Boy," said the man, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten to bat yet."

Well, Paul has at least gotten to bat in other cities. But he definitely has a lot to be discouraged about. For every point he's gotten on the board it seems the other team has more. But he knows that with this spiritual "game" the points for Christ start accelerating over time. In this city, he isn't yet up for bat. Verse 16 says, **Now while Paul waited for them at Athens...** Paul wasn't planning to engage in ministry here. He was just waiting for the rest of his team to show up. But God had a different plan. God moved Paul to start preaching. And we are going to divide this sermon up rather simply into what Paul saw, what he felt and what he did. For a change we are going to have three points and be done.

I. What Paul Saw

A. *Athens – "the most learned, civilized, philosophical, highly educated, artistic, intellectual population on the face of the globe" (Ryle)*

What did Paul see? Verse 16 says that Paul was waiting in Athens. So he saw Athens. And according to 1 Thessalonians, while he was waiting alone he had a lot of time on his hands. From the subsequent speech in this chapter, it is quite clear that Paul had wandered around the streets of the whole city, witnessing the splendor of that city. It was a magnificent city, known around the world for amazing buildings, sculptures, and works of art. The Parthenon has been called "one of the greatest masterpieces of architecture" and "probably the most perfect building ever conceived and built by man." Whether that is an exaggeration or not is probably a matter of opinion, but the city *was* well known for its magnificent buildings, sculptures and art. Paul would clearly have seen that. You couldn't miss it in Athens.

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But there were other things he likely would have seen. With his knowledge of Greek philosophy (and we will get to that on another Sunday), Paul would have known this to be the city of philosophers - men like Socrates, Plato, Solon, Pericles, Demosthenes, Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Epicurus, Aristotle, and Thucydides. Paul was familiar with some of that philosophy and he quotes it and proceeds to show its bankruptcy in verses 22-34. But he would have seen at least some of the philosophers and schools of that day.

But the city didn't just attract philosophers; it attracted the best artisans, mathematicians, musicians, masters of rhetoric, writers, actors, and scientists. The Athenians laid down the principles, terminology and methods of mathematics that are used to this day. Pythagoras and Aristarchus made major contributions to astronomy. Archimedes is said to have invented the science of hydrostatics (one of the few sciences that this polytheistic culture produced). This was stuff that made ancients awe-struck.

This was also the cradle of democracy. This was the cultural and intellectual center of Rome, and it was always crowded with students and tourists. And those tourists are mentioned in verse 21. In fact, there were more students and tourists there than there were citizens. This was the place that attracted some of the brightest minds of the empire, so much so that one author said, "the most learned, civilized, philosophical, highly educated, artistic, intellectual population on the face of the globe" resided in this city.¹ This could have been a very intimidating place for Paul to preach. Almost everywhere you went you found intellectuals. It was a university city.

Another author says,

"No other city has contributed more to the civilization of mankind than Athens. It is the place where Socrates was born, Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and many others. It is the place that humanism and democracy were born. The intellectual light that Athens created will always be alive."²

Of course, that was a pagan who wrote that, and I think that Jerusalem and Geneva both rivaled Athens. But it is clear that the city of Athens *has* had an enormous influence. To this day even Christians have been impacted with the thinking of Athens without even realizing it. The wisdom of Athens is almost seductive. So Paul saw the Athens that everyone else saw. But he did not react to it the same way some Christians today do.

¹ J. C. Ryle, "Athens." An essay in my files without publication information.

² http://www.sikyon.com/Athens/athens_eg.html

B. Athens - a city totally given over to idols

1. The pervasiveness of the idols

Verse 16 goes on to say, **his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.** Paul goes to the root of the issue that made Athens a bastion of darkness, immorality and empty philosophy. Paul uncovers the heart of its culture. It was their idolatry. If (as Henry van Til says) culture is religion externalized, then there is a connection between this idolatry that made Paul sick and the fascinating culture of Athens. And I want to examine this idolatry for a bit.

It would be hard to conceive of any city having more idols than Athens. One ancient eyewitness of Athens said that you were more likely to meet a god in Athens than a man. There were 30,000 public statues erected to every conceivable god. When you add the idols in private homes, the other images of gods, the writings and music about the gods, and the streets and forums and places dedicated to gods, you can see why the ancients said that Athens was more religious than any other city. They said that it was hard to walk in some places because the street was so crowded with idols. One ancient author said that the whole city was one whole altar, one entire sacrifice and offering to the gods.³ That shows the demonic stronghold there. And then you had the people who were selling idols to the tourists. And you had eight major festivals to the principle gods and goddesses during which they were continually recommitting themselves to the gods.⁴ So it is no exaggeration to say that the city was full of idols or as the New King James Version has it, was “given over to idols.” Every aspect of their life and culture was idolatrous. Their sports, their music, their philosophy, their view of family, their politics – every aspect was given over to idols. And this in turn led to some rather bizarre concepts in their treatment of women, their idolatry of sports, their love of homosexuality, their strange medicine, their politics and other things I won’t have time to go into. You cannot separate the wisdom of Athens from the idols of Athens. Many Christians try, but I don’t believe you can do it.

³ See John Eadie, *Paul the Preacher* (London: Richard Griffin and Company, 1859; republished by James Family: Minneapolis, 1979), p. 182.

⁴ The eight festivals were 1) festival to Athena (Minerva in Latin), 2) the festival to Apollo, 3) festival to Demeter in early fall, 4) a female only fertility festival in late fall, 5) a festival to Poseidon (Neptune in Latin), 6) a festival to the spirit of the dead, Anthesterion, 7) the festival of Dionysus (Bacchus in Latin) which was a drunken orgy, 8) a festival to Zeus (Jupiter in Latin) at the beginning of summer.

2. The demons behind the idols and the culture (v. 18b; 1 Cor. 10:20)

And one of the reasons this so troubled Paul was because of the demonic that lay behind the idols. When some say in verse 18, “**He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,**” the word for “gods” is literally demons. They knew the reality of thousands of demons. They called these gods “demons.” These demons were a part of their life. Hosea 4:12 and 5:4 indicates that it wasn’t simply physical idols that needed to be contended with. He speaks of the spirits behind the idols. Paul says, **the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons...** (1 Cor. 10:20). And he warned the Christians that they could end up in fellowship with demons if they were not careful. They could end up being influenced by demons, without even realizing it. Athens was literally swarming with demons just as it was crowded with idols – which explains the poor results later in this chapter. Athens was a stronghold of the enemy. It was a pit of darkness, and Paul no doubt felt the oppression of the demonic there just like we missionaries feel it when we go into polytheistic India. And I say this to give you a heads-up that when you get deeply involved in your modern “Athens,” don’t be surprised if you get oppressed and even afflicted with demonic issues.

C. What was the fruit of this idolatrous wisdom? (vv. 18-21)

1. Epicureanism (v. 18)

Very quickly, what was the fruit of this demonic wisdom? This section doesn’t show all of the bitter fruit – there was horrible fruit in sexuality, family, politics, medicine and so many areas. But I will just refer to issues highlighted in these few verses. First, it produced a variety of humanistic philosophies such as the two mentioned in verse 18 – **Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him.** What I find fascinating about this is that both of those philosophies divorced religion from life and were somewhat skeptical of the gods they worshipped. The Epicureans were thoroughgoing materialists who did not believe in an afterlife, and who saw pleasure as the chief end of life. That is really the ultimate thing they worshipped. They believed that the gods were so far removed from life that they exercised no influence, but the Epicureans also encouraged worship of the gods because it gave a certain aesthetic pleasure. But man, not God was the center of their thinking. It was a thorough going humanism. So you can have all kinds of gods and still be humanistic.

2. Stoicism (v. 18)

Then there were the Stoics who stressed reason and self-sufficiency, and had a pantheistic view of God. Like the Epicureans, they taught that everything (including the gods) was materialistic. But they had a slightly higher moral standard than the Epicureans. It's an oversimplification, but you can say that the Epicureans' philosophy was "Enjoy life!" while the Stoics' philosophy was "Endure life!" But neither philosophy had obtained life. They had no personal God, no purpose in life and really no purpose beyond the grave. And even though their philosophies were different, the Stoics also had man as the center of their thinking. It was thoroughgoing humanism. Both philosophies were just different varieties of humanism.

3. Cynicism (v. 18)

And like most humanists they were cynical about transcendent truth. Their question in verse 18 is no surprise: "**What does this babbler want to say?**" The Greek word for "babblers" is literally "seed-picker," and it refers to a person who doesn't seem consistent. A "seed-picker" is an insulting name that refers to a person who picks up a stray idea in one place, and another idea from another place, and is not consistent. It didn't seem consistent to speak of a transcendent God who is also personal; one God but more than one person; etc. What Luke goes on to show in verses 19-21 is that the Athenians are really the seed-pickers who are always looking for something new to listen to. The descriptions I am giving could just as easily be given of many university professors – intelligent, but cynical and ready to poke holes in everything.

4. Separating supernatural from learning (v. 18,32)

Fourth, it led to separating the supernatural from learning. I found this point fascinating, and unexpected. With all of the idols in this city, I would have expected a more integrationist approach with their religion. But they argued against "superstition" and the supernatural in their academics. They didn't deny the existence of gods, but the gods had no relevance to life. The older miracles of the Greeks were no longer believed. When Paul teaches about the resurrection in verse 18, it seems very strange and foreign to them. "Who would want a resurrection?!" Verse 32 says, **And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked...** It wasn't academically respectable to bring the supernatural into academic studies (unless you allegorized them – which was quite common among these philosophers). It reminds me of the Darwinian insistence that science must never resort to the Bible or to the supernatural. You even have Darwinist theologians arguing

that science must not be held hostage by the Bible. Their definition of science excludes all supernatural. They think, “We need to depend upon pure reason. Our minds are the judges of truth.” You see demons don’t care if you believe in the idols or if you become an atheist, so long as your mind is insulated from the truth of Scripture and from the power of God in most of life.

5. Sacred/secular dichotomy (v. 18,32)

And that mocking of the resurrection also showed the sacred/secular dichotomy that the Epicureans and Stoics had introduced into their education. They didn’t have any problem with worshipping gods, but for them, truth was secular and humanistic. I know it seems odd, but as we will see, this secular concept is religious – the religion of humanism. It is the same kind of dichotomy that you have going on in modern education. In fact, so much of modern education is modeled after the Greeks. When God is excluded from the government classrooms, it is not an innocuous thing. It flows from this demonic culture of Athens. And even Christians have picked up this sacred/secular dichotomy. When they go to the so-called “book of nature” for studying evolution, sociology, psychology and other disciplines and go to the book of Scripture for church they are doing just what these philosophers did. Demons know that the human heart longs to worship, so they provide vehicles for that, but they also want to insulate the mind from seeing all of life as subject to God. So they had a secular education. So these people are doubly hardened in their unbelief. They feel religious, but they are practical secularists.

6. Syncretism (vv. 16,19-20)

But this made their minds unrooted and led to syncretism. It may seem odd that the sacred/secular dichotomy leads to syncretism, but that is always what happens. And the reason for that is that all of life is religious, and if you pretend that something is secular, automatically you have adopted a foreign religious concept. If something is not flowing from your religion, it is flowing from some other religion. My sons have found that university education is thoroughly religious, but it is the religion of humanism.

Anyway, you can see the syncretism of these Athenians in the religious sphere by their collection of many foreign gods (you’ve got to cover all the bases), but you can also in their academic sphere (which was this Areopagus) in their desires to hear new things in 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.” The Greeks were great at adding new ideas into their philosophy. They wanted to study everything. Tolerating new philosophies was the politically correct thing to do in Athens, no matter how far-fetched they might be. It was seen as an academic quest for truth to investigate everything. Only Biblical religion was sneered at in academia, just as it is today. Why? Because Biblical truth is absolute, allows no competitors, hates syncretism and is lethal to every form of humanism.

7. Love for novelty (see the requirements for PhD theses) (vv. 19,21)

The seventh thing hinted at in these verses that you find in Athens was a love for novelty. We see that in the verse we just read, but Luke comments on it in 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.** It was a relentless quest for learning. As Paul said, “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). And always, the novel was honored. Modern PhD requirements that the student write something that has never been written about before leads to the same problems that this quest for the new led to back then. Gary North is right when he says that Higher Education needs to be gutted and started all over from a Biblical perspective. Even seminaries have adopted the Greek model of learning. You can see it in all these complicated new ways of interpreting the Bible, new theories of creation, new books on why women can pastor after all, etc. The novel is honored.

8. Learning for learning sake (v. 20)

And the outline mentions two other things that I won't dwell on for very long: learning for the sake of learning, rather than the Biblical model of learning for the sake of doing and being transformed, and glorifying God.

9. Seeking meaning apart from revelation (v. 20)

And then (point 9) trying to seek meaning apart from revelation. And of course this is the heart of humanism that makes man's mind the criteria of truth. This is a big problem in Christian circles. Listen to what Martin Luther said: He said that the Bible must be used for

...judging, and illuminating all the statements of all men.... Therefore nothing except the divine words are to be the first principles for Christians; all human words are conclusions drawn from them and must be brought back to them and approved by them.

Presuppositional thinking is the antithesis of humanism. You've got to start somewhere, but there are really only two options: 1) Start with God's mind (as revealed in the Bible) or 2) start with man's mind. The former is Christianity; the latter is humanism. God's Word must be the touchstone for life.

D. Lessons:

1. The need for divine revelation to guide a city

Let me summarize this first point by giving some further lessons. We are still dealing with what Paul saw in that city. First, we can learn the absolute need for divine revelation (what Luther spoke of as the "first principles" for everything, or the axioms for everything). In 1 Corinthians 1:21 Paul said, "**The world through wisdom did not know God.**" This is a city in utter darkness even though it has the brightest of the bright guiding it. Brilliance alone is not enough to guide a city. It needs the revelation of the Scriptures. Unguided wisdom will never save a person. But unguided wisdom will never be enough for education, government, counsel; it will never be enough for a city or a State. America needs the guidance of the Bible. And the darkness of Athens certainly illustrates that.

2. The danger of thinking that you can separate "the wisdom of Athens" and the "culture of Athens" from the idolatry of Athens.

A second lesson is that there is a danger in thinking that you can separate the wisdom of Athens from the idolatry of Athens. This is what Thomas Aquinas, the great Roman Catholic scholar sought to do. He tried to take the best insights of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, and mix them with the Bible. But little did he realize that it made for a syncretistic religion with terrible results. Let me just give you a couple results: Aristotle's false view of money was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and it gave rise to one of the most messed up and socialistic economic systems to ever come out of the church. And Roman Catholic countries have always tended toward socialism, poverty and stagnation. John Robbins has a great book that demonstrates this. It is called, *Ecclesiastical Megalomania: the Economic and Political Thought of the Roman Catholic Church*.

Second example: Thomas Aquinas mixed the *political* views of the Greeks with the Bible and ended up making Roman Catholic countries centralized in politics. Robbins book also documents this Greek/Romanist political connection.

And many other examples could be cited. Aquinas mixed the philosophy, art, historiography, astronomy and other views of Athens with the Bible and produced error. The problem that Galileo was opposing was not the Bible, but the Roman Catholic practice of taking Aristotle's science as "truth."

The bottom line is that you cannot separate the wisdom of Athens from the idolatry of Athens. They are inseparably mixed. And this is the problem that I have with most modern Classical Education. It is immersing people in the art, math, history, literature and philosophy of Athens. It is idolizing their wisdom just like the world of that day did. And when Christians immerse their children in Athens, they shouldn't be surprised when their children think and act like Athenians. When you send your children to Caesar don't be surprised when they become Romans (as upwards of 80% of Christian children are becoming when they enter college).

It is ultimately impossible to be totally successful in separating the demonic aspects of culture from the culture. The culture has got to be Christianized. As Henry Van Til said, culture is religion externalized. You ought to memorize that phrase. Henry Van Til said that culture is religion externalized. Another way of saying this is that culture is worldview made tangible. We need a radically Christian culture, not a Christianized version of the Athenian culture. And I know that there are many godly Christians who disagree with me on this, but I ask you to look at the fruits of Classical Education over a long period of time. We can't keep doing the same thing and expect different results. The Puritans were godly people. You know how much I admire them. But they lost their children over this very issue. They were trying to mix the educational philosophy of Athens with the theology of the Bible. If you don't see what I am telling you as being Biblical, ignore it. But I'm telling you that the implications of Classical Education down the road are not good. I have seen it over the generations, and I have seen it in graduates of current schools and home schools. Just take this as a heads-up.

Some will object that they know many people who have gotten a secular education and/or a classical education that is mixed with Christianity, and they have turned out fine. But let me quote Robert L. Dabney's response to this viewpoint.

Christianity must be a present element of all the training at all times, or else it is not true and valuable education. Some one may say that this broad proposition is refuted at the outset by frequent instances of persons who received, at least during a part of their youth, a training perfectly non-Christian, and who yet are very useful, and even

Christian citizens. The answer is easy: It is the prerogative of a merciful Providence, and the duty of His children to repair the defects and misfortunes of His creatures and to bring good out of evil. But surely this comes far short of a justification for us if we willingly employ faulty methods which have a regular tendency to work evil. Surely it is not our privilege to make mischief for God and good Christians to repair!⁵

3. The danger of thinking that education will solve man's problems.

A third lesson we can learn is that there is a danger in thinking that education will solve man's problems. That ignores the issue of depravity. You could not have gotten a more educated city than Athens, and yet they were plagued with every imaginable civic and moral problem. And their educational solutions were just as insane as our modern solutions. Their sexual education of the young was very similar to Planned Parenthood's, but more aggressive. But it didn't work, much to their consternation. These philosophers sought to solve the disintegration of Athenian society, but they failed to recognize what James says: "**this wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic**" (James 3:15). If education alone were the solution to American problems, then Athens would have solved their problems with education. They tried, and failed. And both conservatives and liberals need to realize this. Everyone is banking on education solving our problems. It won't work. We need to dismantle those government schools. They are part of the problem.

4. The danger of thinking that technology will solve man's problems.

The last lesson (on this first point) that I want to highlight is the danger of thinking that technology will solve man's problems. The men who came up with the remarkable friezes, known as the Elgin Marbles, were incredibly bright men. The designers and contractors who build the temples of Luxor, Carnac, the Parthenon or the Coliseum were marvelously skilled. They were not fools. But they foolishly thought that the ever-increasing knowledge base in technology would solve human problems. But it did not. In the same way, modern man acts as if science and medicine has no limits. Do the sexual perversions of Planned Parenthood cause incurable disease?

⁵ Robert L. Dabney, "The State Free School System," in *Discussions*, vol. IV (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1979), p. 220.

“No problem, people think. We just need to spend more money on research, and we will cure it.” Are schools failing? No problem, we will add more money, buy more computers, train teachers more scientifically. There is no end to the optimism modern men have in science and technology. But what Paul saw did not impress him as being the solution. To Paul, the only solution was the kingdom and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So that summarizes what Paul saw. He saw a city in desperate need, and they did not know it. They were blind in their “wisdom.”

II. What Paul Felt

A. *Indignation*

And so we move on to what Paul felt. Verse 16 says, **his spirit was provoked within him**. The word for “provoked” is what we get paroxysm from. It refers to being greatly upset and angry. The statues of these idols have amazed artists for centuries. But it didn’t send wonder into Paul’s spirit. It sickened him to his stomach. It upset him. It bothered him. It glorified rebellion, licentiousness and humanism. Where others saw advancement, Paul saw slavery to Satan. Where others saw beauty, Paul saw a gross robbing and distortion of God’s glory. Where others were attracted to the art, Paul was repulsed by this art. And notice that these weren’t Jews that he was upset with. He obviously felt that there was no excuse for pagan idolatry either. And we should never become comfortable with idolatry in our city. How we respond to the idolatry that is rife through our nation is a reflection of the degree to which we are close to God.

B. *Compassion*

But there was a second emotion that we see in Paul – compassion. And it can be seen in his preaching to Jew and Gentile alike in the public square. It can be seen in his sermon on Mars Hill. It can be seen in Paul’s attempts to free these men from their bondage to Satan and to see them brought into the kingdom of God’s love.

C. *Sorrow*

J.C. Ryle says there is one other emotion that is hinted at – sorrow. One dictionary says that this word for “provoked” has implied in it a deep concern. Paul was sickened and saddened by what he saw. It moved him to see hands capable of such excellent work being used to oppose God. It bothered him. So there was likely sorrow involved as well.

D. Some lessons we can learn

I cannot apply this any better than J.C. Ryle did 150 years ago. He said,

Reader, these feelings which stirred the Apostle are a leading characteristic of a man born of the Spirit. Do you know anything of them?... Hear what is written of Lot in Sodom: “He vexed his soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds.” (2 Peter ii. 8.) Hear what is written of David: “Rivers of water run down mine eyes, because they keep not Thy law.” (Psalm cxix. 136.) Hear what is written of the godly in Ezekiel’s time: “They sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst of the land.” (Ezek. ix. 4.) Hear what is written of our Lord and Saviour Himself: “He beheld the city and wept over it.” (Luke xix. 41.)

In Ezekiel 9, when God was about to destroy Jerusalem, He told His angels to mark those “**who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it**” (v. 4). Only those were spared from God’s wrath. You see, it is not just our mind that must be renewed by God’s Spirit, but also our emotions and our actions. God wants us to learn to hate the things that He hates and to love the things that He loves. He wants our passions to be conformable to those of Christ. Do you look with indignation at the Pharisees who keep people out of the kingdom? Do you look with sorrow and compassion at the lost? When you look at the occultic symbols in our state capital buildings do you get provoked in spirit and long for God to transform our state? If you did, it might affect your prayers and actions. Does secular education bother you deeply? Ask God to capture your emotions so that you can feel like Paul felt when faced with this pervasive idolatry.

III. What Paul Did

A. He did not delay (v. 16 “while he waited for them...”)

Finally, let us look at what Paul did. First of all, though verse 16 starts by saying, **while he waited for them...**, he could no longer delay. Though his team was not with him, he felt that he needed to dive in. He knew he could not procrastinate when God’s Spirit was stirring up his spirit.

By the way, procrastination is one of the surest ways to grieve and quench the Holy Spirit’s promptings within you. When he stirs you up to action over and over again, and you repeatedly delay to act, you will eventually quench His promptings. He won’t prompt you any more. Cast off procrastination when God’s Spirit is moving within you.

B. He did something (v. 17)

Secondly, Paul did *something*. He couldn't do everything, but he felt that he must do something. Verse 17 says, **Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.** They could ignore him, yes. But he was at least trying. Paul had every reason to be inactive. After all, he hadn't planned on preaching in this city. This was an emergency escape plan. And anyway, he needed a break. He had been faithfully preaching for months, and he deserved a vacation in this city. This city was totally given over to idols; they gloried in their idols. How was he going to be successful? But Paul never worried about success. That was in God's hands. His was the duty, and he did something. And every one of us can do something to oppose evil and advance God's kingdom.

C. He pitted the wisdom of God against the wisdom of man (v. 17-18)

Thirdly, Paul pitted the wisdom of God against the wisdom of man. He didn't just push his way around. He didn't take clubs and knock the heads off of idols. He knew he had to start with the minds of men because this was the gateway into their souls. And so verse 17 says that he **reasoned**. And he didn't reason evidentially. He reasoned from the Scriptures. Verse 18 says, **because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.** Paul was arguing presuppositionally. He knew that they would reject that, and in his later speech he demolishes their arguments by a transcendental argument – by arguing the impossibility of the opposite. If His message of the Gospel is rejected, then they don't have an intellectual leg to stand on. We will look at that at a later time. But he starts pitting God's good reasoning against their foolish reasoning. And he knows they are thinking the opposite to be true – that the Gospel is foolish. 1 Corinthians 1:23 says, **but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.** He knew that it would sound foolish, but he gives it anyway. Why?

D. He pitted the power of Christ (the supernatural) against empty philosophy (v. 18)

Well, point D gives part of the answer, and that is that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It works even when people initially reject it. So Paul pits the power of Christ (as seen in the resurrection) against the emptiness of their speculative philosophies. Their philosophies could not rescue anyone from drunkenness. In fact, if a person wanted to get drunk, he would turn to Dionysius. If he wanted to indulge his lusts, he would turn to

Aphrodite. If he wanted to steal, he had Hermes on his side. These gods could help people to sin, but could never rescue people from their sins. They could bring death, but they could never bring life from the death. So Paul's message of Jesus and the resurrection speaks of a power that went way beyond their religion.

E. He made an antithesis between truth and error

- 1. "foreign gods"**
- 2. Jesus and the resurrection**
- 3. "new doctrine"**
- 4. "strange things to our ears"**

Finally, he made a sharp antithesis between truth and error. He didn't buy into pluralism that says, "Whatever you want to believe is OK." No, it was clear that Paul showed them the error of their ways. Amazingly, he will later tell these wise people of their utter ignorance (v. 30). He tells them that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. There is no other way to the Father except through Jesus. This can be seen from their accusation that what he taught was **new doctrine** and **strange to our ears**. Paul wasn't trying to make common ground so that they could be friends. He was showing the utter contrast between the religion and philosophy of the Greeks and the true religion and philosophy of Christ.

And we've got to restore antithesis in our modern age. There is too much softening of the Word of God to make it acceptable. There is too much tossing of portions of the Word of God that are embarrassing or outdated. People are trying to reconcile humanistic philosophy with the Bible; humanistic science with the Bible; humanistic psychology with the Bible. Why? Because they don't want to offend; some want to be more successful in reaching intellectuals. There may be other motives good and bad. But ultimately it is being ashamed of the Bible as an outdated document. Well, the Bible was just as outdated for Athens as it is today for America. Yet Paul still preached the Word, and by the end of this chapter there were a few converts who had been rescued from demonic slavery into the liberty of the Gospel.

IV. Closing Lessons:

A. ***Don't be afraid to stand alone***

Let me end with a six more lessons. First, don't be afraid to stand alone. Paul felt all alone in a pagan city, but he stood his ground for the glory of God. Where would we be today if Athanasius had not stood alone in the fourth century in defense of the Trinity? Where would we be today if Luther had not stood alone against the Emperor? Where would we be if people had not stood alone at the stake because they cared for God's glory? Where would Naaman have been if the little maid in Syria had been ashamed of her strange faith and had not stood alone and given her mistress the only solution to Naaman's leprosy – the God of Israel? We must be willing to stand alone.

B. ***Do not be impressed with the philosophy, art and educational model of Athens (Classical Education)***

A second admonition that I would give to you is that we really shouldn't be impressed with the philosophy of Athens, or the art of Athens or the educational model of Athens that has become America's model.⁶ The citizens of Athens were taught how to read, write, understand math, science, arts, philosophy and literature in a purely academic way and without any reference to God. Well, that is ripping out the two biggest foundations of Hebrew education – that education must lead to godly application and that all of education must be grounded in God's Word and bring glory to God. Our government schools teach people how to read, write, understand math, science, the arts, philosophy and literature without any reference to God and the Bible whatsoever. This means that it is a godless education. God is taken out of everything. Robert L. Dabney said that to have education without Christ is like reading Shakespeare's Hamlet play without Hamlet. He went on to say

“The comparison of these truths will make it perfectly plain that a *non-Christian training* is literally an *anti Christian training*.”⁷

⁶ Paul was certainly not impressed. As Matthew Henry says,

A scholar that has acquaintance, and is in love, with the learning of the ancients, would think he should be very happy if he were where Paul now was, at Athens, in the midst of the various sects of philosophers, and would have a great many curious questions to ask them, for the explication of the remains we have of the Athenian learning; but Paul, though bred a scholar, and an ingenious active man, does not make this any of his business at Athens...

⁷Robert L. Dabney, “Secularized Education,” in *Discussions*, vol. IV (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1979), p. 238.

I am very desirous of ending all government education because without Christian education, America will never be restored. It will continue to raise up godless generation after godless generation with the increasing fruits of Athens. Read the horrible lifestyle of Athens and you will begin to understand why America has increasing violence, homosexuality, pedophilia, debauchery of every form, cheating, clogged courts, and the problems of ancient Greece. You cannot follow the educational model of Greece without seeing some of the results of Greece in our own land.

The Puritan writer, Matthew Henry said,

And this city, after the empire became Christian, continued incurably addicted to idolatry, and *all the pious edicts of the Christian emperors could not root it out*, till, by the irruption of the Goths, that city was in so particular a manner laid waste that there are now scarcely any remains of it. It is observable that there, *where human learning most flourished, idolatry most abounded*, and the most absurd and ridiculous idolatry, which confirms that of the apostle, that when they professed themselves to be wise they became fools (Rom. 1:22), and, in the business of religion, were of all other the most vain in their imaginations. The world by wisdom knew not God, 1 Co. 1:21. They might have reasoned against polytheism and idolatry; but, it seems, the greatest pretenders to reason were the greatest slaves to idols: *so necessary was it to the re-establishing even of natural religion that there should be a divine revelation, and that centering in Christ.*⁸

Matthew Henry was saying that without a restoration of the Bible as the foundation of learning and without making Christ the heart of our education, we will never be able to reform a society. Despite all the attempts of Christian emperors to convert Athens, they were unsuccessful. The most important issue was neglected – that of education. Matthew Henry understood this. Modern Christians do not seem to.

C. Don't neglect the supernatural

Another lesson is that we must not neglect the supernatural. During the 1700's and 1800's in England, there were many who mocked the supernatural. They made the resurrection of Christ a mere symbol. But for Paul, it was the heart of the Gospel. 1 Corinthians 15 says that without the resurrection the Gospel is lost. Without the supernatural, we have a dead

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, vol. VI (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, [nd]), p.

religion. Now some people believe in the resurrection, but they don't believe in any other miracles. Don't neglect the supernatural.

D. Don't be overwhelmed by idolatry and unbelief

Point D says, "Don't be overwhelmed by idolatry and unbelief." It is appropriate to be vexed in spirit. It is appropriate to get angry or sorrowful. But don't be overwhelmed, throw up your hands and give up. Though God does not convert all in Athens, he converted an equally pagan city called Nineveh. And he did it in one day. He can do it if He wills. The duty is ours, the outcome belongs to God. Don't give up. Don't be overwhelmed. Just do what you can to advance God's cause.

E. You can be faithful in a pagan city

Point E says, "You can be faithful in a pagan city." Paul did not succumb to the demonic. He did not give up his testimony. He did not adopt the philosophy or worldview of Greece. He did not become seduced by the debauchery. Though he was an incredibly intelligent man, he did not get sucked into the fascinating philosophy of the wise. He did not become a Hellenist. He stayed a radical Christian.

And we too can be faithful in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation if we will have the antithesis of Paul, maintain a Christian education, not borrow practices from the world, and do all of our thinking from the Scripture, by God's power.

F. We should pursue faithfulness to the old paths, not novelty

And that is my last admonition – pursue faithfulness to the old paths, not novelty. The Greeks in Athens loved the newest fad to titillate their curiosity. But when that idea became passé, they were always looking for something new. Paul's example steers us to value the old paths and to find God's favor in the process. When the intellectuals of Athens confront you, don't be intimidated and don't be sucked in. Anchor your soul in the Word of God and call out to God for the power of the Spirit. With Word and Spirit you can remain faithful in Athens too. Even when the score is 18-0 and you haven't gotten up to bat yet, God can make you more than conquerors. May it be so, Lord Jesus. Amen.