

Sermon 55, Are You Starting a New Religion?, Acts 17:16-34

Proposition: Paul brings the Kingdom of God to Athens, where his message about knowing God and the humanity of Christ looks better than the best of pagan civilization.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I rarely let my knowledge of the historical background inform any major point in my sermons. The information that's in the text is the key information for us to know, and if the Lord thought a particular piece of background info was crucial He would have put it in there. But this time, I think that knowing one key bit of information helps us to make sense out of Paul's behavior in Athens and to better see his key point. That key point, which we'll discuss more in a moment, is that inducting Athenians into new religions was illegal. Knowing that helps us see that Paul focused on proclaiming the high God, the one deity who is superior to every other deity or object of worship, and that he also focused on proclaiming the humanity of Jesus. He did not want to be seen as peddling a new religion; his goal was to inform the ignorance of his hearers regarding the objects of religious worship that were all around them. This text has been taken as a model of cross-cultural engagement, and so it is. It cannot answer all our questions about how to evangelize cultured

pagans — but it definitely shows that the Kingdom came to Athens too, and that the good news about Jesus is clearly superior to the most impressive parts of pagan culture there.

I. The Occasion, vv. 15-16

The first thing to see is how Paul got into position for this majestic confrontation between Athens and Jerusalem.

A. Paul Stranded in Athens, v. 15

He has come a long way from Berea — so far, no doubt, that his opponents from Thessalonica aren't going to bother coming all the way to Athens to catch up to him. It is 250 miles on foot from Berea to Athens, and it would be more by ship. Either way, the distance is too far. Paul was left without the rest of his team, who had been left behind in Berea. And so, here he is, stuck in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to get there and join him.

B. Paul Provoked on God's Account, v. 16

So as he loiters around Athens, what happens to him? He is provoked on God's account. Now, this word "provoked" has a long OT backstory. It is used repeatedly to describe how God feels about His people worshiping idols. "They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger" (Deu 32:16 ESV). Paul felt exasperation with the profusion of idols, and he felt it on God's behalf!

Here, brothers and sisters, is a much-overlooked motive for evangelism and missions. Why should we care? Not just because people are going to Hell, important as that is. We should also care because God is being deprived of the honor and glory that is rightfully His, and it is going instead to the most worthless and absurd hunks of rock and metal. People are bowing before the Almighty Dollar. They are literally hunched over their phones masturbating to Pornhub. They are worshiping personal peace and affluence, convenience, the environmental god, and a hundred other abominations and absurdities.

One ancient writer joked that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Paul saw, Luke tells us, that the city was "submerged in idols" (*kateidolon*). And that made him angry on God's behalf.

Let me ask you something: Are you bothered to see what rightfully belongs to God going to something else? Do you get irritated when you see people tithing to the NFL instead of to Jesus? Are you upset when you see vast hordes of Buddhist monks? Do you hate how the temples of commerce and the whims of consumers loom larger in the popular imagination than the law and desires of God?

Or do you figure that God will take care of it and that if He doesn't get worshiped right, well, He's a big God and it doesn't really matter because He's still omnipotent and worthy and glorious and all the rest of it?

Yes, our God is mighty and the failure of wicked idolaters to worship Him doesn't damage His glory or His ego. But it is still objectively messed up. Missions exist because worship doesn't. And that was what motivated Paul in the cultural capital of the first-century world. Let it motivate you. Pray for our missionaries. Pray because you believe that worship is God's right, God's due, and that He ought to be getting it from every human person on earth.

II. The Background

Well, we know that Athens was riddled with idolatry, and that its most famous structure, the Parthenon, was erected as a temple to the goddess Athena. What else do we need to recall about Athens to understand Paul's response here?

A. Athens, Home of Hellenistic Culture

The first thing to get in mind is that Athens is a cultured place. It was not Gillette or some off-Broadway backwater. Just as American culture overwhelmingly flows out of New York (print media and books) and Los Angeles (film and visual media), so Hellenistic culture flowed out of Athens. The Koine Greek spoken throughout the East was a descendant of the Attic Greek spoken in the region around Athens. The great works that gave coherence to Hellenism, to Greek culture, were by and large nurtured in Athens. The city was to philosophy, architecture, politics, rhetoric, and sculpture in the classical world what 19th-century Vienna was to classical music or 20th-century New York was to the world financial system.

B. Athens, Fascinated with Novelty, v. 21

What Luke emphasizes to us, though, is that Athens was the home of novelty. Whereas today cheap plastic toys and clothes are the home of novelty—Shein brags that it “releases 6,000 fresh ‘stock-keeping units’ (including old designs in new colors) every day”¹—Athens was the home of novelty in those days. They only cared about something new. Everything had become old hat to them. The world was not interesting; it was boring.

Could the parallel to our society, with its fixation on “news” and the hours we spend every day consuming “the news”, be any clearer? The Athenians cared strictly about novelty. So do we. What do we hate? Reruns! What do we love? New music, new books, new films and videogames, new software and hardware updates!

C. Athens, Where New Gods Are Illegal

One final piece of the Athenian cultural puzzle, though, is this understanding that the proclamation of new gods and the conversion of Athenians to new religions was illegal. One would think that in their craze for novelty they would love to have new religions waltz into town every few days. That was indeed the case, but in this, as in so many other areas, the state stepped in. Eckhard Schable gives a few representative quotes from classical scholars, and comments: “In both classical and Hellenistic times the introduction of foreign cults and rites required the official authorization of the state.” He goes on:

Josephus writes that the Athenians severely punished those who initiated people into the mysteries of foreign gods; this was “forbidden by their law, and the penalty decreed for any who introduced a foreign god was death.”

The request to be allowed to introduce a new deity into a city would prompt the magistrates to ascertain the novelty of a cult, the desirability of allowing the cult, and the requirement of the cult, such as the need for a temple, an altar, sacrifices, festivals, priests, and processions.²

¹ *The Economist*, “Shein Exemplifies a New Style of Chinese Multinational,” Oct. 6th, 2021.

² Eckhard Schabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 727.

In other words, you should not think of the attempt to set up a new religion in Athens as being similar to the attempt to set up a new religion in our society. Here anyone is allowed to proclaim any god he likes, and set up any kind of organization he likes. But getting a religion permitted in first-century Athens was more like the process to get a large industrial operation permitted in our society. You had to have a detailed account of yourself, your deity, your land and input requirements, and so on. And there was a very real possibility that your permit would be denied if the local authorities disliked it for any reason.

Thus, Paul is walking into a minefield. They will like his message, because they love novelty. But if he lays it on too thick, or suggests in any way that what he is preaching is different than an already-permitted religion (such as Judaism), he is going to fall foul of the law and be in big trouble. Mob violence he can handle. But getting Christianity considered as a new, non-permitted religion is not something he wants to provoke for the nascent church.

III. The Response, vv. 17-33

So Paul, provoked in his spirit by the total lack of worship and respect for God, takes this challenge head-on.

A. Synagogue Evangelism, v. 17

He goes first to the synagogue in yet another display of nobility. He does not have a great deal of success there, but he goes there and finds Jews and God-fearers who are willing to talk to him.

B. Street Evangelism, v. 17

But then, in the best Athenian tradition of Socrates, he starts engaging in street evangelism. We have not seen Paul doing this before in Acts. Peter preached on the streets of Jerusalem, but Paul has pretty much been in synagogues or in gathered house churches. Now, though, he takes to the open air and starts evangelistic conversations with those who are walking by.

C. An Official Account of Paul's Teaching, vv. 18-31

Well, it wasn't too long before some who considered themselves philosophers, no doubt along the lines of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, came by and engaged with him. They were followers of the only two philosophical schools named in the Bible — Epicureanism and Stoicism. The Epicureans thought that the gods were irrelevant to human existence and that pleasure was the ultimate good. That didn't mean that they engaged in unbridled hedonism, doing whatever felt good at the moment. They too believed in a rational, moderate, and long-term use of pleasure. But they saw no ultimate prospect for humanity beyond enjoying this life, because they believed that all existence was ultimately the result of chance collision of atoms.

The Stoics had a strong moral streak. Like the Epicureans, they had been founded around 300 B.C.; unlike them, they believed that duty was important and that some kind of shadowy afterlife was likely. Some have attempted to paint Paul himself as a quasi-Stoic, though of course he would not have identified himself as a follower of any particular school of pagan philosophy.

So, talking to Paul, these pro philosophers are not very impressed. One group (possibly the Epicureans) call him a "seed-picker," someone who has just picked up scraps of information here and there but does not have a coherent or credible systematic understanding of what he's talking about.

The other group, possibly the Stoics, wonders whether he is actually doing something illegal, proclaiming “foreign divinities.” Perhaps they even thought that he was talking about the god “Jesus” and his goddess girlfriend “Anastasia.” So they subject him to something of a formal, though half-jocular, inquisition.

“May we know?” That is their question. Knowledge is what drove these people, and you’ll notice how carefully Paul majors on this theme of knowledge as the vanquisher of ignorance when he talks to them. He also talked about knowledge and ignorance to the pagan Lystrans, of course. But here he speaks at greater length.

He is brought before the Athenian Areopagus, a body similar to the Roman Senate. It had jurisdiction over all political, cultural, and intellectual matters within the city of Athens. Now, being part of the Roman Empire, it was something of an advisory body. But within city limits, it had lots of authority. As I understand it, this Areopagus was empowered to make the final decision on whether he was indeed a preacher of foreign divinities or whether he was peddling philosophical-religious opinions that were in line with what the City of Athens already allowed within its boundaries. Thus, it’s against that background that we need to understand Paul’s words to this counsel. He was not a weasel, deliberately being evasive. But on the other hand, he was also not going to come charging in with “Jesus is God, and this is clearly different from anything Athenians believe or Jews have been allowed to teach here.” And so he focuses on four cardinal themes of the Christian faith, but in a way that emphasizes their points of contact with existing views within Athens.

1. God

The first thing Paul talks about is God. Even here, he does so in a way that stands out within the Bible. This is the only place in Scripture where the abstract noun “deity” or “divine nature” is used, in v. 29. Yes, he’s talking about the personal God Yahweh, who is never described in abstract philosophical terms in Scripture as “being” or “divine nature” conceived of apart from divine personhood. But Paul wants to be clear that his message is not a new religion, something to be regulated and permitted (or not) by the authorities. It is a kind of philosophical discourse that makes points about the divine nature as such, as a nature.

What points does the apostle make, then? Well, he begins by complimenting their aggressive religiosity and observing that they themselves admit that, in at least one case, it is carried on ignorantly. That antimony between ignorance and knowledge is something he’s going to exploit through the rest of the sermon. The reality that the authorities have permitted and bestowed the state’s blessing upon an altar “to an unknown god” shows that Athenian religiosity is marked more by ignorance than by knowledge. If they really knew what and why they worshiped, no such altar would be necessary.

The knowledge of God begins with creation: He made the world and its contents. He is Lord, He dwells in Heaven rather than in man-made temples (even one as glorious as the Parthenon), and He is not served by human hands. All of these points are paralleled or even explicitly taught by various Stoics. Paul is getting them from Genesis and 1 Kings and the prophets, but even the unconverted reason of Zeno and the Stoics was able to see that if indeed

the high god, perhaps Zeus or perhaps a being even greater and more perfect than Zeus, was creator and lord, then he could not possibly need to be served by human hands. A god who could make this world would not need man to build him the Parthenon; he could make something more glorious than that with a mere word.

2. Man

But Paul doesn't stop there. Though he said that he was going to proclaim the unknown god to them, he goes on to proclaim the unknown man. What is humanity? Plato supposedly called man a "featherless biped." Is there more to say on the subject? Yes, says Paul. He describes human beings as created by God, as a single race stemming from one man (an idea without parallel in classical antiquity), and as controlled by divine providence in their living places and historical periods. Now, again, much of this is parallel to themes in Stoic thought. But he adds that the reason God did all this is so that man could find him. This goes beyond Stoicism; it posits that God is knowable and the purpose of human life is to feel Him out and know Him.

Then Paul quotes from one or two classical poets, one of whom, like him, was from Cilicia. Both statements would be unobjectionable to Athenians. They may not have been of a philosophical school that agreed that we live, move, and have our being in God. But they were aware that the view was out there and that it was a respectable view. Same with the idea that we are the offspring of the divine and therefore the divine is personal like us.

New religion? Or just supplements to themes and ideas already well-known and discussed in Athens for centuries? The Areopagus is probably thinking the latter. It is a twist on existing ideas, for sure, but is it a whole new god with a new cult, temple, etc? It's not sounding like it.

3. Judgment

But then Paul goes on to speak of judgment. The God who made the world, the unknown God who is now becoming known through his proclamation, demands that men repent. The thing they need to repent of appears to be the sins of idolatry — the sins of thinking that the divine nature is like wood and metal and stone.

The reason Paul gives carefully avoids referring to Jesus as God. Instead, God demands repentance because He has appointed a man to judge the world. This should surely prick up the ears of the Athenians. This is something new! But it still does not sound like a new religion, for it is a statement about a man.

4. Resurrection

Paul adds that the human judge who will set the world right has been raised from the dead by God Himself. Now, that is not a religious claim to the Areopagus. That is a historical claim, and as such they do not consider it to be a new religion manifesting itself among them.

Notice, if you would, that Paul connects the right to judge the world with resurrection from the dead. The one who was too perfect to be held by death is perfect enough to judge the world. He is perfect enough to know who is right and who is wrong, what was well done and what was ill done. The firstborn from the dead is indeed the ruler over the kings of the earth!

D. A Divided Response, v. 32

The response, as always in Acts, is divided — unfortunately, not between believers and unbelievers, but between the mockers and the interested. That is a good start. Luke is willing to work with that. So is Paul. After all, the Areopagus decided that whatever Paul was teaching, he was allowed to teach it in Athens. There is no need to throw him out of town. He's good.

So even if not nearly as many believed as in Thessalonica and Berea, he also didn't spark any riots. Brothers and sisters, in this account I am tempted to see the image of our own open, secular society. Yes, for the past 80 years we have been losing converts, money, influence, and numbers. But at least we aren't thrown out by angry mobs, either! The polite interest and rowdy mocking of the Athenians, who really didn't care what Paul said as long as it didn't trigger the bureaucrats, parallels the attitude our secular elites had up until recently.

Now our society is moving ever closer to Thessalonica, where Christians can be mobbed and driven out. But we aren't there yet.

IV. The Converts, v. 34

Even in sophisticated Athens, though, Paul did win some converts. The Kingdom is coming even in the city of novelties.

A. A High-Status Man, Dionysius

A member of the Areopagus, something like a member of the French Academy today, believed.

B. A Woman, Damaris

So did a woman. This excited much comment among the commentators, because it is well known that respectable women in Athens did not go out and participate in public life, such as listening to debates in the Areopagus. Was she a courtesan, like the women featured in Plato's *Symposium*? We don't know. But we do know that Luke wants us to recognize that Jesus is rescuing men and women alike from Satan.

C. Others

He's also rescuing others. Paul was indeed starting a new religion in Athens, but he was doing it incognito. What they didn't know, he was proclaiming. His God and His Jesus are better than the best pagan civilization has to offer.

So don't be a Hellene; be a Christian. Praise God that in the ignorance of paganism, the light of the gospel shone forth and converted people out of Satan's Kingdom into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son. And think about how Paul's message about God, man, judgment, and resurrection may yet speak to our own post-Christian culture. Amen.