

Paul's interaction with the Athenian philosophers apparently continued for many days. Luke's narrative implies that they never were able to get their minds around the things Paul was saying, and it seemed to them that he was in some sense speaking about deities and events completely foreign to their culture and understanding (17:18). Perhaps out of frustration, or possibly to subject his claims to more thorough, formal scrutiny, these philosophers convinced Paul to appear before the meeting of the Areopagus and there present and defend his strange doctrine (17:19-20).

The English term *Areopagus* is a transliteration of two words in Greek that refer to the Hill of Ares. Mars was the Roman counterpart of the god Ares, hence the name "Mars Hill." The Areopagus was a place but it also came to signify the council that met there as a matter of regular practice. John Stott's comments are helpful in understanding why the Epicureans and Stoics brought Paul to that place.

*"Situated a little northwest of the Acropolis, it [the Areopagus] was formerly the place where the most venerable judicial court of ancient Greece met. For this reason the name came to be transferred from the place to the court. By Paul's day, although cases were sometimes heard there, the court had become more a council, with its legal powers diminished. Its members were rather guardians of the city's religion, morals and education."* (The Message of Acts)

Evidently the Areopagus was also a gathering place for men who sought philosophical interchange and debate. It's not clear whether Paul's presentation was before the formal council or an informal gathering, but Luke seems to imply the latter, both by his transitional parenthesis (17:21) and Paul's opening salutation: "Men of Athens."

Whatever the nature of the assembly, Paul introduced his proclamation by establishing a point of connection with his Greek hearers. In order to speak to them of Christ and His gospel, he needed first to get their attention. But more than that, he needed to find common ground from which to communicate with them and carry them forward.

That common ground was the Athenians' religious worldview and culture. Paul openly acknowledged them and then substantiated his statement by pointing to their city filled with temples, altars and other objects of worship (17:22-23a). Those introductory comments may have gotten his audience's attention, but Paul had a larger, more specific reason for launching his defense in that way. His goal in affirming the religiosity of the Athenians was to zero in on one particular altar he had seen: an altar erected for the worship of "*an unknown god*" (v. 23b).

Becoming all things to all men for the sake of the gospel means being able to meet people at the point of their own worldview, understanding, culture and practice. Genuine communication is impossible otherwise, for two people must first "speak the same language" before they can understand what the other is saying. Unless both parties process and interpret what is being said through the same grid, there is no communication, however much either or both may believe otherwise.

Paul started from a point of common acknowledgement among his hearers, namely the fact that the Greek pantheon may not be all-inclusive. Men are finite in every way, so that only a fool would claim to have fully bounded all reality, natural as well as supernatural. The Athenians prided themselves on their philosophical and metaphysical insights, and so regarded it as a matter of mature understanding to acknowledge the possibility of gods unknown to them. And if such gods exist, wisdom and propriety dictate that those gods should be honored with due worship and devotion.

Paul saw in the Athenians' affirmation and worship of an "unknown god" a platform for proclaiming to them the true and living God. They embraced the notion of a deity or deities not known to them, and Paul was prepared to reveal just such a deity. (Some have argued that Paul was acknowledging that the Greeks were worshippers of Yahweh, albeit in ignorance (v. 23b), and that this substantiates the notion that all religious belief systems ultimately converge on the true God. But Paul wasn't affirming their worship of Yahweh, but their innate sense that a deity exists of whom they are ignorant.)

- d. The first thing he did was distinguish this God from all others. The Greeks (as all human beings) conceived of deity in human categories; they thought of the gods in terms of human features and qualities and these deities could be associated with (if not localized) in physical structures dedicated to them and their worship.

But the God Paul proclaimed isn't like this: He can't be in any way relegated to the creaturely dimensions of space or time. Men are constrained to the creaturely because they are creatures; this God is the uncreated deity. He's not only distinct from His creation, He is the One who brought it into existence and governs it as sovereign Lord (17:24). This notion of deity was a radical departure from the thinking of the Athenians and Greco-Roman religious culture.

The Greeks and Romans conceived of the gods as effectively superhuman beings. Though immortal and powerful, they were arguably more human than divine, being subject to creaturely weaknesses and limitations as well as external forces beyond their control. (Similarly, note again the Epicurean conviction that the gods are composed of the same elemental material as everything else that exists.) Even the divine *logos* of the Stoics is something very different from Paul's deity. The Stoic *logos* is an impersonal principle of reason incarnate in the creation, not a personal being who, as sovereign Creator, exists entirely distinct from it.

- e. Paul's God cannot be relegated to human (creaturely) categories and conceptual schemes, but neither is He dependent in any way upon His creatures. Quite the opposite, they are utterly dependent on Him (17:25). Because of their innate self-centered, self-referential worldview, people conceive of the divine/human relationship *bilaterally*. That is, it is a reciprocal relationship of "give and take": Men "give" to their gods through worship, sacrifice and service, and the gods reciprocate by blessing them (in any number of ways). For all the differences, all religion amounts to *magic* – people employing the resources available to them to gain the notice, approbation and benefit of the objects of their worship.

But Paul proclaimed a God whose relationship with His creatures is entirely unilateral: *He gives and they receive*. Even if they desired or attempted to do something for Him, they have absolutely nothing to give. He is the source and possessor of all things and He bestows upon men whatever they are and have (cf. Psalm 50:1-11; Isaiah 66:1-2; Romans 11:33-36; 1 Corinthians 4:7; etc.).

f. The unilateral nature of God's relationship with His creation has a crucial implication for men, including Paul's enlightened, independent and self-confident audience. If everything originates with Him and flows from Him, it follows that He is the Creator and Lord-Provider with respect to humanity collectively and every person individually. This is implied by Paul's larger argument, but he made it explicit and further developed it by means of two qualifying ideas:

1) The first is that the entire human race has its origin in one man whom God directly created (17:26a). This being the case, every human being is as bound to this God as the original man from whom they are descended. If Paul's God is the Creator-Lord of the first man, He is the Creator-Lord of every man. This was Paul's overall point, but with a particular emphasis: He observed that from this one man God made "*every nation of mankind*," which points to and refutes the common notion among ancient cultures that deities are localized in and devoted to individual nations and people groups. One effect of this belief was that a nation's strength, power and glory were thought to reflect the same qualities in its gods (and vice versa) (cf. Isaiah 10:5-11, 21:1-9, 36:1-20, 46:1-47:3; etc.).

The confusion of Athens' philosophers was understandable; the true God is utterly foreign to natural human conception. A self-centered mind will always conceive of deity in personal (and so national) terms. But unlike humanity's imagined "gods," Yahweh isn't a tribal or national god. He isn't the custodial deity of a particular people or individual, but the Lord of the entire creation and therefore of every nation, tribe, and person.

2) The previous qualifier suggests a second one: If Yahweh isn't a national deity, but the Lord of heaven and earth, He isn't confined by any sort of human boundaries – national, cultural or otherwise. Quite the opposite, He assigns the boundaries for every human being. He gives life and sustenance to every person; that sustenance, in turn, encompasses everything of which life consists, including men's "*appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation*." More than merely the provider of life's daily needs, the Creator-God provides life itself and oversees the way it plays out – for epochs and nations as well as for individuals.

g. God's sovereign and unilateral relationship with His creation has another implication for men, this one pertaining to their responsibility to Him. God has created and ordered the world – and specifically the world of men – such that they would *seek* Him, and that seeking Him they would find Him (17:27).

His goal in creating the human race and their earthly habitation isn't acknowledgement or worship in some remote or sterile sort of way, but that His image-bearers would know Him and commune with Him. Man is person *from* Person in order to be person *unto* Person. Unlike the self-preoccupied, aloof and unconcerned gods of the Epicureans or the impersonal *logos* of the Stoics, Paul's God is deeply involved in the world of men. Moreover, His involvement isn't the detached dominion of a remote overlord (the God of *deism*), but the active, intimate engagement of a concerned and present Creator.

The fact that God created men to desire and seek intimacy with Him establishes their responsibility, but their obligation is heightened by the fact that He is *near* – so near, in fact, that, if their natural faculties could allow it, they could actually reach out and touch Him. The Creator God isn't incarnate in the works of His hands as the Stoics surmised, but He is nonetheless fully immanent in them: God is in, with and throughout His creation such that Paul could assert, “*In Him we live and move and exist*” (17:28a).

Paul's God isn't like the gods of the Epicureans or the *logos* of the Stoics. If the Greek commoner had misjudged true deity (evident in his many altars), much more had Greece's philosophers and intelligentsia. But their error wasn't due to a lack of testimony – either by God or the human heart (ref. 14:15-17). Paul wasn't introducing notions of deity and humanity never before considered among the Greeks; Greece's own poets spoke of men being the offspring of deity (17:28b). And if that's the case, why would such a Creator-Father make Himself inaccessible to the children He created in His own image and likeness, especially when He did so for the express purpose of securing their communion with Him?

- h. Now at last Paul was ready to confront Athens' idolatry. He introduced his discourse by noting without condemnation the deep religious convictions of the Athenian people. He had disarmed his audience in order to gain a hearing, but now he had brought them sufficiently far that they were able to see the error – indeed the blasphemy – of their religious understanding and practice.

Paul showed the true God to be vastly different from what the natural Greek mind envisioned: He is the uncreated Creator of everything, and therefore exists distinct from His creation and unconstrained by anything, including every sort of lack or need. As the Creator and Possessor of all things, His relationship with men is strictly unilateral. They can give Him nothing, and He desires nothing but their love and devotion. He created men in His own image and likeness to be *sons* rather than servile subjects or even reciprocal parties.

All men are God's offspring as image-bearers, and this means that they can know much about Him by considering themselves: Men are personal beings who derive their nature from God; how, then, could they imagine that He can be conceived in terms of inanimate objects, however precious? Even more, how could they ever think that *they* could define Him – the One who created and defines *them* (7:29)?