

Men Are From Mars Hill – Another World Confronts Ours (Acts 17)

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This text has much to say to our times, to what's going on in the Mars Hill of America and in the marketplace of ideas in our day. It shows Paul confronting pagan culture without conforming to it or compromising with it. Sometimes people claim a 'Mars Hill model' of engaging culture by being like the world so they'll like us, being 'missional,' but we need to be careful to understand our mission is not to be like the world, it's to be different from it, set apart as gospel witnesses.

Mars Hill has become a symbol of how Christians try to relate to the world. Russell Moore, a right hand man of Al Mohler at Southern Seminary, writes on this in *Retaking Mars Hill* 'contemporary Christians often speak of the need to "engage" popular culture ... or that they want to "redeem" popular culture for the glory of Christ ... One group wants to imitate pop culture but Christianize it. Another group wants to find ways in which [pop] culture itself presents the gospel. Both want to use pop culture to reach the wider culture, and both find their justification in Paul's talk on that first-century...hilltop described in Acts 17...[at] the Areopagus, in which [Paul] cited the lyrics of pagan poets and the architecture of pagan temples. Christians, they argue, should follow Paul and use popular culture to "build a bridge" with its consumers, finding in popular works a "common ground" through which we can attract their interest and later...the gospel. The appeal to Paul's speech is nothing new. Previous generations of Protestant liberals found in it justification for appealing to the "cultured despisers" of religion on their own terms. If a culture embraces Darwinism, don't unsettle them with Genesis, point to the order and beauty of the natural order. Or build a bridge from, say, existentialist philosophy...'¹

There's a lot of controversy and confusion surrounding Mars Hill, but today I want to consider what Paul actually did and said there relating to culture. We need to start with the context of Acts 17 before we can apply it to ours.

Acts 17:15 says those with Paul 'brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.'¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.¹⁹ They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus [or in the KJV "Paul stood in the midst of Mars Hill] and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

²⁶ *And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,* ²⁷ *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,* ²⁸ *for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said...*

We'll stop there for now. Before the conclusion/application, we need to start with the context of Paul's speech. If you like notes or headings, we'll see 3:

1. The Context (v. 15-21)
2. The Message (v. 22-31)
3. The Response (v. 32-34, including our response and application)

My title is: Men Are From Mars Hill—Another World Confronts our World.

By “men” I don't mean males as opposed to females who are from Venus, though Greeks worshipped the god Mars as well as the goddess Venus (and planets were named after Greek gods). But by “men” I mean all of mankind, men and women, are represented here on Mars Hill. In a sense, all of us are somewhere in the landscape of this Mars Hill scene.

The ancient world is not that different from our world, and the gospel can turn our world upside-down just like it did theirs in v. 7. How many of you have the NASB? v. 7 calls Christians ‘*men who upset the world,*’ but I like the ESV/NKJV in v. 7: ‘*men who have turned the world upside-down have come here also.*’ The gospel doesn't just upset the world's apple cart, it flips it over, turns it upside-down, shakes it out, then turns it right-side-up. It's a world-tilting gospel from another world, from a King who said *my Kingdom is not of this world*. It's an other-worldly alien message to our backwards world. In v. 18 they wonder what planet Paul's from as they say ‘this guy is babbling, it sounds like he's talking about alien gods; Jesus and Anastasis?’ *Anastasis* is Greek for the resurrection. Some thought Paul's talking about a new goddess named Anastasis, as Greeks had no concept of the resurrection

So we need a little context as to where Paul is in Greece when v. 15-16 say he was in Athens. There's a lot of history in this city, one of the oldest cities of the world (dating back 3,400 years). Long before the modern Olympic games were revived in Athens in 1896, this city at the end of OT times was the center of the ancient world, in its glory days of the 4th-5th century B.C. Athens has been called the cradle of western civilization and the birthplace of democracy. It was home to philosophers like Socrates and historians like Herodotus and physicians like Hippocrates (the 'father of western medicine' who's credited with coining the Hippocratic Oath still used today by doctors). It was home to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's school, and in NT times it was still the world's center of learning and philosophy, even though it was not the force in politics and other areas that it was in its glory days. In v. 14-15 it seems Paul is left alone in Athens until his companions can join him, probably a few days at least or maybe 1-2 weeks.

So Paul has some time on his hands for some sightseeing of famous Athens:

- The Acropolis [SLIDES] was the central citadel of the city on a hill
- The Parthenon [3 SLIDES] gives insight into v. 16 (*city was full of idols*)
- The Agora [SLIDE] marketplace mentioned at the end of v. 17, an ancient outdoor sort of mall, where people might get on soapboxes to give speeches about politics or religion.

It was a forum for public discourse Paul joined in. He's not on a European vacation as a tourist, he comes as an evangelist and apologist for the one and only true God and the gospel of a resurrected Lord. This was not just a marketplace for purchases, it was a marketplace of ideas. It wasn't just a place to buy food for whatever you would throw in the pot to cook, it was a melting pot of culture, religion, philosophy, business, the arts. But Paul isn't just here to make a travel scrapbook of Athen's sights, sounds, and statues. He's not here to snap selfies in front of the temples that were around the Agora. His reaction to the architecture isn't awe, it's anger.

Verse 16 says Paul was "*provoked* [it's a Grk word we get paroxysm from, stirred up anger, agitated, incensed] *within him as he was observing the city full of idols.*" Notice Paul didn't have his head in the sand. He was aware of the culture around him, and angry in a righteous way, grieved at idolatry in this place where God's common grace was so evident. Notice also he didn't withdraw from society. He didn't complain to others about the pagan culture like so many do today who just forward emails with bad news about society instead of trying to share the good news with society. Paul was angry yet did not sin because he channeled his anger over sin to try to help the sinners

Verse 17 said he tried to reason with them (Greek *dialegomai*, the word we get dialogue from). It's teaching with discourse, an interchange. Paul didn't assume they knew what he was talking about, there was interaction to make sure they understood his message and v. 18 says the philosophers *conversed with him*, there was a conversation, disputing in return, a pointed interaction

EPICUREANS - the first group mentioned in v. 18 believed in no afterlife, even the soul comes to an end at death, they taught. So they were all about pleasure and the pursuit of happiness in this life while avoiding discomfort and responsibility, like many men today, hedonistic materialistic slackers.

STOICS - the second group in v. 18 tried to suppress emotion by resigning themselves to fate, submitting to their lot in life as the key to true happiness. 'Grin and bear it, stand tall, stick out your chin and take it-whatever comes.' The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius in the beginning of the Gladiator movie, famously followed Stoic ideas. Stoics were strong self-made people.

Did Paul fit in with them or try and be like them? Were they impressed how cool or in step he was with their culture or how much they had in common? Actually what stood out was how different and out of step his message was. In v. 18 actually they see Paul as a babbler talking about some strange gods. Literally they call him a seed-picker (not a compliment or cool club card). It was a word for someone like a bird who picks up things here and there, F.F. Bruce says 'a retailer of second hand scraps of philosophy.'² This is not the smartest or most sophisticated chap in Greek ideals of wisdom or rhetoric.

In v. 19 they call it a *new* teaching. It didn't fit in, it was *foreign*. In v. 20 they say he's talking 'strange things.' Paul wasn't culturally 'with it,' he had weird ideas, counter-cultural ideas. It wasn't compatible with their thinking. It was the radical differences and *uniqueness* that stood out to them. Some insulted him, but others were intrigued, and so v. 19 says they brought Paul to the Areopagus or Mars Hill where they loved to talk about new things as v. 21 explains.

It was a place of intellectual elites, professors, philosophers.

SLIDE - the Roman name for Areopagus is Mars Hill, named for their god Mars (Grk Ares/opagus). They called it a hill because it rose about 400 feet above the city, a massive rock structure with a place on top where a council could meet. It has steps still in use today to ascend for elevated discussions and to this day Paul's speech in v. 22-31 is written in stone there [SLIDES]

Trials were held at the Areopagus. Socrates had faced trial here, accused of deprecating the Greek gods.³ In Greek mythology they believed the gods or goddesses here 'descended to discuss matters, to make decisions, and to conduct trials requiring verdicts [even the god Orestes was on trial here, the myths said, so]...Mars' Hill became the place where decisions were made.'⁴ In this the very same place on Mars Hill the famous orator Demosthenes began his defense with almost the exact same words in 330 B.C.: " I begin, men of Athens, by praying to every god and goddess...I pray--this specially concerns yourselves, your religion..."⁵ Paul had received a classical Greek education in Tarsus, and here he may be drawing on it but with a new twist:

²² *So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.'* [SHOW SLIDE OF ANCIENT GREEK ALTAR] *What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*

This takes to the next section, from the Context to **The Message** (v. 22-31)

Notice with me he was *aware* of his culture, because he *cared* for them. It's not a memorized canned speech, he's aware of and adapting to his audience. He's not ignorant of them or their ignorance, that's his connection point to them. Notice also Paul's apologetics focused on presuppositions. What I mean is he didn't lean on intellectual arguments or evidences, Paul went after their presuppositions/starting points: you know of God but your culture and idols show He's unknown to you. The true God you don't know I will now make known. I'm not here to prove He exists, it's self-evident, whether you deny or try to suppress the truth or not. I'm here to proclaim who the true God is and speak to your conscience about how you a sinner can know God rightly.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans the same way he begins this lecture to the Greeks, by talking about how since creation, God has been made known through creation itself so that all are without excuse as they exchange the worship of the Creator for things of creation, creatures, gods of our creation. The truth is there in creation and in conscience, God's Law is on our hearts, even with no Bible, but we suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1-2).

[it's a moral problem, not a mere intellectual problem]

That's Paul's presupposition in his evangelism, but he didn't presuppose they would understand biblical terms in their culture with no Bible background. In v. 24-31 Paul makes known the unknown God, and as we do the same to our culture, often with limited Bible background, let's learn from him here.

He doesn't quote chapter or verse, but everything he says is backed up by a chapter and verse. For example v. 24 paraphrases Psalm chapter 146, v. 6: '*the God...the Maker of heaven and earth...and everything in them*' and 1 Kings 8:27 '*...will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house[temple] built!*'

And without saying 'pull out your Bibles' Paul in v. 25 also paraphrases Ps 50:12 (God doesn't need us) and Isaiah 42:5: '*God...gives breath...and life.*' v. 26 is Deut 32:8 and v. 27 sums up Jer 23:23: He is "*not a God far away.*"

So Paul's not watering anything down, he's soaking everything in Scripture. He changed his vocabulary for his audience, but didn't change the message. Paul has 4 points about God:
He's Creator, Sustainer, Ordainer, and Savior.

First, God is Creator. Paul starts in v. 24 where his gospel presentation in Romans starts, where the gospel of John starts, and where the whole Bible starts: in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all in it. Creation is the foundation for the gospel, a literal man in v. 26 who we're all descended from, a literal fall into sin in Gen 3 and literal scattering at Babel in Gen 11 that's also alluded to in v. 26. Paul presupposes Gen 1-11 is actual history and he's not ashamed to say so before Greek elites and evolutionists. This wasn't cultural common ground, this was a cultural confrontation here. He didn't avoid Gen 1-11 for the gospel's sake, Gen 1-11 is his launching pad for the gospel.

Both Epicurus (father of the Epicureans in v. 18) and the Stoics taught a sort of evolution, as did Aristotle,⁶ so Paul not only contradicts their worldview in v. 24, he corrects the idea of multiple gods as he speaks of The true God who is "*Lord of heaven and earth.*" He's transcendent, meaning He's over it all, above it, bigger than it and can't be contained "*in temples made by man*"

God is as we sing: 'Lord of all creation, of water, earth, and sky
The heavens are [His] tabernacle [not earthly temples], Glory to the Lord on High
God of wonders, beyond our galaxy ... The universe declares [His] majesty
He is holy, holy [i.e., utterly totally "set apart"], Lord of heaven and earth'⁷

Paul's first point, **God is Creator**, leads to his 2nd point: **God is Sustainer**

²⁵ *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

Paul says 'you think you need all these gods, the true God doesn't need you. God doesn't need us! We need God! God doesn't depend on human hands for anything, but we depend on His hand for life and breath and all things!' What we think or do towards God does not affect God's existence at all, but what God thinks of us and does for us does affect *our* very existence. God doesn't believe in atheists. But He graciously gives all life. He doesn't owe man anything, but we owe our very life and breath and everything to Him!

Some Greeks believed in gods creating, but not in a sustaining providence. Paul points out even some of their ancient writers got it partially right here and v. 28: *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."* [that's in the sense of His creation, even pagans sometimes recognize common grace] And so he says in v. 29 '*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*'

In other words, God is not like us and doesn't need us. We don't create Him!

Is v. 28 a proof text for us keeping up with the latest pagan pop-cultures so we can be better evangelists? No, actually Paul is quoting from poems 300-600 years old at the time! That's not exactly being up-to-date with the times or on the cutting edge! Paul had a classic Greek education and probably had to learn these poems growing up. It's interesting he quotes a Stoic named Aratus, and Epimenides, the very poet who put up altars to an unknown god. I think his point in quoting the poems is the same as citing inscriptions to gods they admit they don't know: even the professed pagans, who refuse to acknowledge and honor the true God, give testimony to the inescapable fact that there must be a sovereign, life-giving, all-powerful Creator God. This makes their turning to creatures and created gods more condemning.

Bahnsen: 'Paul demonstrated that even in their abuse of the truth pagans cannot avoid the truth of God; they must first *have* it in order that they may then distort it...pagan poets in the very act of suppressing and perverting the truth presupposed a measure of awareness of it .. in accord with what they deep down in their hearts knew to be true in spite of their systems.'⁸

There is some place for this type of reasoning in biblical apologetics. We can show the post-modernist or moral relativist from their own words how they actually presuppose God's truth they suppress (ex: when they say "you can't be sure about anything" ask them "are you *sure*?" or you can show their declaring "there is no absolute truth" is an absolute truth claim). Creationists can quote non-Christian scientists who illustrate Rom. 1. An atheist can be pushed to his starting points and challenged to give an account for the laws of logic he uses but can't explain without God. But good arguments can't save, only God's Word, Spirit and good news can save sinners.

God's Word presents God as Creator, God as Sustainer...#3 God as Ordainer

²⁶ *And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries ...*

In other words God has sovereignly ordained or pre-determined where you would be born and grow up, how long you would live, what nation/ethnicity you would be from. I'm not using the word "races" because there aren't any different races scripturally or scientifically. As I've taught before⁹ "races" is really a concept that has more to do with evolutionary theory, that multiple races developed from multiple origins (and even in racist Southern states in Civil War times, Christians resisted the polygenesis multiple races theories). If that's new to you I'll put the link to that on these notes online and I'll also put the link to last week's Sunday School class on 'One Race, One Blood.'¹⁰

But the foundation is right here in v. 24: *from one man* (KJV '*one blood*') all nations came. There's only one race, the human race. All nations are related and descended from Adam. And again, this confronted the Greek culture, as they thought Greeks were superior and in a different class than other people. One scholar says they 'divided the people of the world into two classes: the Greeks and the barbarians. Everyone not born in Greece was ... a barbarian ... Greeks taught they had originated from the soil on which they dwelled. Paul's teaching, therefore, conflicted with their own theory of origin [and]... replaced their defective theory with God's revelation of man's descent.'¹¹

And unlike the Greek gods struggling with other gods, this God is sovereign and v. 27 says He's not distant, we can know Him personally if we seek God.

God is Creator, Sustainer, Ordainer, and lastly: God is Judge and Savior

³⁰ *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*"

In v. 27 Paul used a verb that Homer used of Cyclops when he was blinded, feeling around and trying to find his enemy. Paul's saying we're blinded by sin, but we should seek God, He's nearby if we reach out in repentant faith. In v. 30 Paul explains God has been patient with them in the past but now is the day of salvation for all people who repent before the day of judgment. It was the Areopagus who thought Paul was on trial at their supreme council, in v. 31 Paul says *they'll stand trial before The Supreme Council*. But God has appointed a man Christ Jesus as Judge, and if you repent, as your Savior

So we've seen the background, the message, now what about The Response?

³² *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. [both Stoics and Epicureans didn't believe in bodily resurrection] But others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ So Paul went out from their midst.*

Did Paul fail because he didn't get a response of people converting on the spot, because there wasn't a successful altar call at the unknown altar? No, Scripture records this faithful message and leaves the results in God's hands and timing. It shows us proclamation is man's job, salvation is God's job. In v. 34 afterwards, as others hear more, God does His work: ³⁴ *But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite [a Mars Hill elder!] and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*

God cares for all people, women, hardened intellectuals. Some did respond, later, not on the spot, but as God drew them to believe in Jesus as Creator, Lord, and Savior who died for their sin and rose again. It's the message God uses to save professors or evolutionists, like my dad was, through a 7th grade girl brave enough to proclaim a Creator he didn't know.

How should we respond? I think this should encourage us to not give up on giving the gospel to those who are intellectuals or skeptical, hardened. The gospel is the power of God to salvation to all who believe, Jew and Greek. If we're bothered by how pagan our culture is becoming, let's be moved to make known the unknown Creator and His Son the Judge and only Savior. Let's respond by not catering to culture, but confronting it with God's truth. Let's not be afraid of sounding strange or people insulting or mocking us.

Are we like Paul in v. 16-17, troubled by the false gods and sin all around us and moved to try and share with people the true God? Or are we like the Epicureans in v. 18 who were more interested in comfort and pleasure? Or are we like the Stoics in that same verse who were the self-made, the strong, the ones who hide their emotions? Maybe some here resist the preaching of the doctrines Paul teaches in the v. 25-31, or maybe some look down on the preacher in your minds like v. 18 (you say 'what's the guy up there babbling about?'). Maybe like v. 21 you're more interested in what's new than what's true. Or maybe you're not interested and don't really want to be here but are because your family wants you here, or you try to keep up appearances, but inwardly like v. 32 you find Christianity foolish. Or maybe like in v. 32 you aren't sure about some of all this but are willing to listen, to hear more. Maybe like v. 34 you will respond in faith.

Where are you on Mars Hill? When we have the opportunity like Paul to share the gospel with those who don't know God, let's make sure we don't leave out the resurrection. That was what got their attention in the beginning (end of v. 18) and the end (v. 32). Russell Moore explains we 'feel that other people won't resonate with this strange biblical world of talking snakes, parting seas, floating axe-heads, virgin conceptions, and emptied graves ... an awfully freakish-sounding story about a man who was dead, and isn't anymore, but whom we'll all meet face-to-face in judgment ... [but he tells of this truth in his youth pastor days]... A group of teenagers, mostly fatherless boys, some of them gang members, started attending my Wednesday night Bible study. Some of them arrived at the church engulfed in a cloud of marijuana smoke. I found they weren't impressed with the "cool" supplemental video clips provided by my denomination's publisher. ... But what riveted their attention was how weird we were. "So, like, you really believe this dead guy came back from the dead," one 15-year-old boy asked me. "I do," I replied. "For real?" he responded. I said, "For real." They were amazed at the fact that my wife and I had dinner together, and that we didn't really want to be somewhere else. "Dude, this is like *Nick at Nite*," one said, referencing the black-and-white family sitcom reruns on television each night. "The mom and dad are here, 'how was your day,' and the whole deal." They couldn't believe that in our church, elderly people and teenagers talked to one another [and all skin colors]... it seemed strange. And, just as at Mars Hill, this strangeness commanded attention [not being *cool or like them*, by being so *different*]. Some believed; some walked away ...

... let's preach beyond the cool to the strangeness of an old gospel story of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. They tell us—in their own films and songs and programs—that they want a gospel, just not the one God provides. We probably won't be considered "cool" to the culture... But... at the mention of the resurrection of the body, a bored-looking American consumer [just might press] the pause button on his iPod, to listen for a while.¹²

¹ <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-07-020-f#ixzz3Bi16opdM>

² F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 351.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 167.

⁴ Bob Boyd, "The Areopagus, or Mars Hill," *Bible and Spade*, 3:1 (Winter 1990), p. 11-12.

⁵ <http://www.demosthenes.com/p/iii.html>

⁶ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge: Embracing Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology and Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Biography from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 229-30.

⁷ Chris Tomlin, "God of Wonders."

⁸ Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, p. 262, citing Ned Stonehouse, *Paul Before the Areopagus*, p. 30; and Cornelius Van Til, *Paul at Athens*, p. 12.

⁹ <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11711030415>

¹⁰ <http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=829141559473>

¹¹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts*, p. 634.

¹² <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=20-07-020-f#ixzz3Bi16opdM>