

ATHENS VERSUS PAUL

by Ray C. Stedman

At the time of Paul's visit to Athens, that city was no longer important as a political seat; Corinth was the commercial and political center of Greece under the Roman Caesars. But Athens was still the university center of the world. It was the heir of the great philosophers, the city of Pericles and Demosthenes, of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Euripides -- these men who established patterns of thought that have affected human learning for centuries. Almost all philosophies follow, in some degree, the teachings of these men. But Athens was long past its zenith when Paul visited it. It was now four hundred years after the golden age of Greece, and, though Athens was still a center of art, beauty, culture, and knowledge, the city had lost all political importance.

Remember that Paul came down from Beroea with certain unnamed Christians and was left alone in Athens. He sent word back to Silas and Timothy, whom he had left in Beroea, to join him there. Evidently the apostle did not intend to stay long in Athens. He was heading for Corinth, the political capital, for Paul always focused upon those areas where the commerce of life flowed and where the influence of a church would rapidly reach out into the surrounding regions. He had decided to wait for Silas and Timothy in Athens, and Luke now tells us what happened there, as doubtless it was later told to him by Paul himself:

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. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. {Acts 17:16-18a RSV}

This section is a powerful revelation of why the gospel needs to be presented to every culture and every age of the world. While Paul was waiting at Athens, he did what any tourist does in Athens: He went sightseeing.

If you have been in Athens, you know what a striking city this is. There are the great temples of the Acropolis, crowned by the Parthenon -- now in a ruined state but nevertheless still one of the most beautiful buildings in all the world. There are many other theaters, temples, and marketplaces of ancient Athens which can still be seen.

As the apostle walked around the city he saw the gods of Athens, the idols that were being worshipped. One of the ancient writers tells us that at this time there were 30,000 gods in Athens!

Many of these statues have survived and you will find copies of them everywhere as samples of ancient art.

Paul recognized that these were not merely objects of art, but were actually gods being worshipped by the people of Athens. Petronius, one of the ancient historians, said that it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man! With 30,000 of them, you can see why this would be true.

Luke tells us that Paul's spirit was moved when he saw this. He was provoked. The Greek word is the word from which we get our word *paroxysm*. Paul felt an intense paroxysm of the spirit, a storm within, as he saw the city given over to idolatry. Each idol revealed that these men and women of Athens had a great capacity for God. They knew there was something beyond man, and they were seeking for it. But each idol also revealed a twisting, a distorting, of that capacity, a sabotaging of it. So, as the apostle went around the city, his spirit was greatly troubled to see men and women blasted by this prostitution of their human powers through the worship of false gods.

What Paul felt was very much akin to what must have moved a group of Christian students recently when they ran an ad in the *Stanford Daily*. I have quoted parts of this before, but I would like to read one paragraph again

because it seems to me to capture the exact sense of what gripped the apostle's heart in Athens:

Why are we Christians willing to follow Jesus into suffering in order to accomplish his mission of liberation? Because Jesus has changed our minds about a lot of things, and we can no longer tolerate the foolishness and futility that is passed out as wisdom at this university. We are tired of the "enlightenment" of this age which is blindly ignorant of its intellectual slavery to materialism and its contradictory obligation to ethical relativism. We are tired of seeing people's lives wasted and unfulfilled because of their submission to the established world order.

That expresses exactly what the apostle felt as he moved about the city, and saw the cloud of idolatry that hung over this city, blotting out the truth and light, and plunging these people into the darkness of superstition. So he began to preach. He could not help it. He knew that the only message that could help people in this state was the delivering word of Jesus.

There were three groups to whom he spoke:

First he went into the synagogue, as his custom was, and there spoke to the religious people, the Jews and devout persons who were there. These Jews (and the Greeks who were following Judaism) were opposed to the idolatry of the city, but could do nothing to prevent it. There was nothing they said that could help the city. They themselves were delivered from idolatry, but they were powerless to deliver the city because they were focusing on their own religious experience. To these religious persons, Paul preached the gospel with seemingly little effect.

Then there were the common citizens of the city whom he met in the marketplace, the agora of ancient Greece -- tradesmen, people going about their business, commercial people coming in with their wares to the city square. There he met them and talked with them. Here were people who were unthinking victims of the idolatry that held the city in its grip. They were sunken in superstition, gripped by fear, uncertainty, dread of darkness, and inner tensions and turmoil. These are always the results of following false gods.

Then there was a third group, the philosophers. These were men who were delivered themselves from the crass idolatry of the city, but who were offering, as an alternative, the barren concepts of pagan philosophy. There are two kinds mentioned here, the Epicureans and the Stoics. Now, do not think that we have left Epicureanism and Stoicism behind, for we have not; they are very much in evidence today.

The Epicureans were atheists; they denied God's existence. They denied a life after death. They were also materialists, and felt that this life was the only thing that really existed and that, therefore, men should get the most out of it. They felt that pleasure was the highest virtue, and that pain was the opposite. Their motto (and it still persists to this day) was "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." They were what we would call today "existentialists," living for the experience of the moment. This is a widespread philosophy in our day, although it is no longer called Epicureanism.

The Stoics, followers of the philosopher Zeno, were pantheists. That is, they believed that everything is God, and that he does not exist as a separate entity, but is in the rocks and trees and every material thing. Their attitude toward life was one of ultimate resignation, and they prided themselves on their ability to take whatever came. Their motto, in modern terms, was "Grin and bear it." They urged moderation: "Don't get over-emotional, either about tragedy or happiness." Apathy was regarded as the highest virtue of life.

You will recognize there are many people today who feel that the best thing they can do is to take whatever comes and handle it the best they can. These Stoics were all proud fatalists, and there are many like them today.

Luke gives us the initial reaction of these two philosophical groups to Paul:

And some said, "What would this babbling man say?" [Those were the Epicureans.] Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" -- because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. [These were the Stoics.] And they took hold of him and brought him to the

Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. {Acts 17:18b-21 RSV}.

This is a very revealing reaction. The Epicureans, who were basically atheistic materialists, were contemptuous of what they heard from Paul. They treated him with utter disdain. They said, "What would this babbler say?" The word *babbler* is literally "seed-pecker." They saw Paul as one of the little birds in the marketplace going around pecking at seeds here and there. They regarded him as a mere collector of fragments of truth, gathering a few choice words from philosophies that he had picked up along the way and trying to impress people. They smiled and dismissed him contemptuously.

But the Stoics were interested. Yet Luke is careful to tell us that their interest did not arise out of a genuine desire to know and understand what Paul said, but out of a shallow curiosity that was intrigued by the fact that he seemed to present two new gods -- one named Jesus and the other named Resurrection.

This was not an unusual concept for Athens; throughout the city you could find altars erected to various themes. There were altars to Shame, altars to Reason, to Virtue, and to various themes.

When they heard Paul speak of resurrection, they thought this was the name of a god, and that he was preaching two new deities. They pricked up their ears because, as Luke said, "All they lived for was to hear something new." That is modern too, is it not?

Here in ancient Athens were all the classes of humanity that are still with us today. There were the religious oddballs, remote from life and powerless to affect it; there were the thoughtless idolaters, sunken in superstition, living lives of quiet desperation, as do millions of people today; there were the atheistic existentialists who were priding themselves upon the rejection of all supernatural things and were focusing upon the present existent; and there were the self-sufficient fatalists who took pride in their ability to handle whatever comes and not show too much emotion in doing so. To all these the apostle presented one thing: The delivering word of Jesus, the word of the power of God unto salvation.

In due course they brought him before the Areopagus.

If you visit Athens today you will be taken up a small rocky hill without buildings, west of the Acropolis, and told that this is the Mars Hill where Paul addressed the Athenian philosophers. I question that this is so, although the word *Areopagus* does mean Mars Hill. But it was also the name given to a court of judges who had the final authority in the city of Athens at this time. It is much more likely that it was this court before whom Paul was brought. They no longer met on Mars Hill, although they had originally. By this time they were meeting in the marketplace in one of the porches surrounding the area. So it is before the court of the Areopagus that Paul appears.

In the message he gave to them, we have a splendid example of just how the gospel operates to deliver men. It is a fantastic message and I urge you to give careful attention as we look at it more closely now.

There are three parts to it, beginning with a most captivating introduction:

So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." {Acts 17:22-23}

This is a most thoughtful introduction. A good introduction always begins where people are, and this is what Paul did. He began right where these Athenians were. He did not denounce them, he did not attack their idolatry; in fact, he paid them a compliment as far as he could. He said to them "Men of Athens, as I've been walking about your city, I've noticed one thing about you: You are a very religious people." The word he used was literally, "you are god-fearers." But the word he chose for "god" was rather unusual. Instead of the

common word *theos* , which means God in his greatness, he chose the word *daimon* , demon, by which he implied that the gods they worshipped were lesser concepts than the great idea of God. They understood that he meant to compliment them because they had a concept of, and a capacity for, God. They were very much involved with and interested in God.

Then he said, "As I've been walking about, I found an altar to an unknown god." There were several of these in Athens. Many centuries before, a plague had been arrested by turning loose a flock of sheep within the city. Wherever the sheep were found they were slain and offered to a god. If they were slain near the altar of a recognized god they were dedicated to it; but if they were slain apart from any of these, an altar was erected and dedicated to an unknown god! Paul found one of these, and said, "This is the God I want to talk about. What you worship ignorantly I have come to declare to you." It was a great introduction. It reveals the emptiness of paganism. If you do not worship the true God, there is no end to your search; you will keep going forever. There were 30,000 gods in Athens, but they had not had enough yet; they had also erected altars to an unknown god! How clearly this voices the agony of humanity, the cry for a God they know exists, but cannot find.

Just last week, Mr. Roper was telling the staff of a young man who came up to him at a rally at Stanford. This young man, obviously upset, his eyes wild, rushed up to him, and seizing him by the shoulders and shaking him, said, "Can you tell me where I can find Dave Roper?" Dave said he felt almost like denying he knew him, but gulped, and admitted that he was Dave Roper. The young man immediately said, "Can you tell me how I can find God?" That was the hunger of his heart.

This is what Paul sensed at Athens, the hunger for the God they cannot find. In the rest of the message, he gives just two things: He unfolds the truth about the living God which idolatry denied, and then he shows them the corresponding truth about man which followed as a logical result of the truth about God:

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything." {Acts 17:24-25 RSV}

What is he saying here?

First, that God is the Maker and not the one who was made. God was not created by man; he is the One who makes man and everything else that exists in all the universe. He is the originator of all things.

We have not moved very far from ancient idolatry. In the ancient world, they took a piece of gold or silver or wood and carved or formed an idol, thus worshipping the works of men's hands. Today we don't use images, but we still see men worshipping themselves, projected to infinite proportions. Man simply thinks of himself, projects this into infinity, and worships that. That is his god. That is exactly what idolatry did. Paul points out that this is not in line with reality. God is not the projection of man; God is greater than man. God originated man. Everything that exists came from his hands. He is the Maker, and not the made.

Second, God is the giver, and does not have any needs himself. "The God who made the world and everything in it is not served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything." God is not looking for anything from man, as idolatry and paganism taught. Men had to bring gifts to the gods, they had to do things for their gods, to propitiate them and sacrifice to them, and bring them all kinds of things.

Men today are still doing the same. The gods of men today still make demands upon them. Do not think that we are free from idolatry, for if a god is that which is the most important thing in your life, that to which you give your time and effort and energy, that which occupies the primary place of importance to you, the thing you live for, then men have many gods even today. Money is a god for some. Fame is a god to others. Your children can be your gods. You yourself can be your own god; you can worship yourself. I am appalled at the number of people today who worship America and enthrone it as the highest value in life, the thing for which they would give their lives, the only thing worth living for. These are the false gods that people everywhere

worship. They make continual demands upon us. They do nothing for us, but we must work for them.

Paul cancels all this out. He says the real God is one who gives, who pours out. He does not need anything from you. He does not live in temples made by man. I am sure he must have pointed to the Parthenon as he said that, for it was regarded as the home of Athene, the goddess for whom the city was named. God does not live in places like that, he said, but he is the one who made you and everything about you, and there is nothing you can give him that he needs. He is, rather, giving himself continually to you.

The third great truth was to show how God draws men and does not seek to evade them. To the pagans the gods dwelt on Mount Olympus, remote from humanity. Men had to go through perilous and hazardous journeys in order to find and placate their gods, to seek them out and find them, while the gods hid themselves from men. But Paul's word is that the true God is not doing that:

"And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him." {Acts 17:26-27a RSV}

The true God is the God of history. He made man as one race, originating from one source. The interesting thing is that today this statement is as scientifically sound as when it was first uttered. Science today admits that there is only one race of men, one species: Homo sapiens. Despite the differences of pigment, stature, and feature that exist around the world, there is only one race of men. They all come from one source. Furthermore, he has intervened to direct their lives through the course of history. He has determined where they shall live, and how long they will live there, how long a nation or empire should take to rise and then fall again; doing so not arbitrarily, but based upon their reaction to the one great reason for which human beings exist: That they might find God, "that they might feel after him and find him." That is why God has allowed history.

The events of human history have all been to this end -- that they might find God, that man might be motivated to search for him. Remember, Hebrews 11:6 says, "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him," {Heb 11:6 RSV}. In Jeremiah 29:13 we read, "Thus says the Lord: ... when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you," {Jer 29:10a, 29:13b-14a RSV}. God is urging men to seek him. That is why catastrophes occur. That is why wars break out. That is why violence occurs. God allows the evil in men's hearts to break out in these terrible catastrophies, these tremendously difficult events, in order to show men that they are not independent; that is a self-delusion to fancy they can live without God for in him they live and move and have their being, as the apostle will say a little later. It is ridiculous, absurd, nothing but a self-delusive, deceitful trick, and dishonest in the extreme, to think that anyone can operate, as a man or a woman, without God. Their very life and breath is coming from him.

There are many people here this morning who could stand up and testify, if we gave you opportunity, that you lived for years in the grip of this idolatrous delusion that you were sufficient in yourself until something occurred that put you flat on your back, or broke your heart, or came crashing in as some great disappointment, and made you realize for the first time that you could not live without God. That is why history exists, that God may reveal himself as the God who draws men, who awakens them, who urges them to find him, to seek him, and who will reward those who diligently seek him.

Now, in the next section, the apostle concludes with a wonderful statement about man. Here we learn some new things:

**"Yet he is not far from each one of us, for
'In him we live and move and have our being';
as even some of your poets have said,
'For we are indeed his offspring.'**

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, 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 men by raising him from the dead." {Acts

17:27b-31 RSV}

What a fantastic statement! It begins with the fact of the dignity of man, recognizing that man is God's offspring. It is not Biblical to go around telling people that man is nothing, that he is vile, that he is a worm, etc. This is not the Biblical view of man as he was created.

I sometimes hear Christians talking as though they were nothing and God is everything. Now, I understand what they mean, but the truth is: Man is not a mere nothing. He can *do* nothing, but the Bible never says that he *is* nothing. What the Bible says is that man is the image of God, and that he has a capacity to respond to God. He is made for God.

Everywhere you go, even among the most degraded and primitive of men, you will find this pattern of the image of God. For one thing, you will never find a man, woman, boy, or girl who does not have a passion for life, who does not want to live, who is not in revolt against death and boredom and frustration and all the other negative qualities of life. They all want to seize hold of life. And you will never find a man, woman, boy or girl who does not have a passion for dominion, who does not want to succeed, who does not want to reach out and try something new and accomplish new objectives, to conquer new territory. That is because man is made in the image of God. Further, you will never find a human being who does not have some power to create, to invent, some ability to produce or fashion or make or shape. This is inherent in the heart of man everywhere; no animal ever does that. Also men seek to communicate, animals do not. These are all part of the image of God which is widespread everywhere. That image is man's greatest dignity.

But right along with this the apostle mentions the tragedy of man. "Being God's offspring [which even your pagan poets recognize is true], we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man." He is saying that, if it is true that we are made with a capacity for God, if we know that we are made to contain and reflect God, then it is not only insulting to God to make an idol of him, but it is also degrading to man. It is saying that we can be satisfied with things that are less than ourselves, that we can find satisfaction in trinkets and trifles and baubles, in material values. Wherever people act on that basis, you will always find them returning to childish actions, becoming childlike. Idolatry of any kind does this to man, degrades him, makes a man act like an infant. In Edwin Markham's great poem, *The Man with the Hoe*, as he is thinking of man in his low estate, he asks the question,

Is this the thing the Lord God made, and gave
To have dominion over sea and land,
To trace the stars, and search the heavens for power
And feel the passion of eternity?

Even in that degraded estate, there is a recognizable a capacity for God. The tragedy is that this capacity is being prostituted into something less than the God for which it was designed. That is what moved Paul so strongly.

The last thing Paul points out is man's responsibility. Men have lived, he says, in "times of ignorance." Now, these "times of ignorance" need to be understood carefully. This phrase does not refer to a certain date on the calendar. It is not speaking of Old Testament times, as such, or of past dispensations, before the present era. These "times of ignorance" are related only to the individual. That is, they refer to the times in your life, or my life, when we, as the offspring of God, creatures made by God and designed for God, were trying to satisfy ourselves with things that were less than God. This is always a time of ignorance, a time when a man is operating on a level that reveals his utter ignorance of reality. Paul declares that God overlooks these times. He does not wipe us out. He does not judge us, he does not hate us and reject us, but patiently waits while we live through these struggling times.

But the apostle further declares that when a man hears about Jesus, when he hears the good news that Jesus Christ is the way to the heart of God, then he is put in a most responsible position. When he learns the truth about Jesus, he then has a responsibility before God to change his mind, to go on no longer acting as he did before. That is what repentance means -- a change of mind. You are responsible to change your mind and lay hold of that which God has provided in Jesus Christ.

Paul gives us here three great facts which underscore the importance of repentance:

First, there is an inescapable day coming. God has fixed a day when he will judge the world. Everyone knows this. You know it, don't you? You know there is a day coming when your life is going to be laid open before everyone, and all the value of it, or the lack of value, will be evident. There is coming a day when every life will be evaluated.

Second, there is an unchallengeable Judge. The One who will do the evaluating will not be a god, remote upon Mount Olympus, but he will be a Man, someone who has lived right here with us, who knows what human life is like, who has felt everything we feel. He will be the One who passes judgment on that day.

Third, God has made this evident to all by an irrefutable fact: He raised that Man from the dead. There is where Christianity ultimately rests. If you can disprove the resurrection of Jesus, you can destroy Christianity in one blow. But as long as that fact remains unshaken, undestroyed, Christianity is indestructible. It rests upon that one great demonstrable fact -- that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is the guarantee that all God says ***will happen***.

Now you can see what a fantastic effect this message must have had. Luke gives us, in these closing words, the reaction of Athens:

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." So Paul went out from among them. But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. {Acts 17:32-34 RSV}

Some mocked. That means their pride was threatened. Mocking is always the defense of pride when it feels itself attacked but has no logical defense; it resorts to ridicule. This is still the reaction of many today. Whenever they hear of Jesus, they begin to ridicule. But Christianity ridiculed is always a sign of weakness, an admission of defeat.

Second, some delayed. They succumbed to the curse of the intellectual -- academic detachment. They viewed themselves as outside the system they were examining and thus detached from it. "Everyone else is subject to this but us." So they said, "We will listen to you again on this; we need more evidence." These are the delaying tactics which many intellectuals are using today.

But some believed. That is the great word here. Some repented, changed their minds. This indicates that among these intellectuals there are earnest, honest people who were trying to find the answers to life. When they hear the good news about Jesus, and understand what this fantastic gospel message really is, how it delivers men from their superstitious fears, how it breaks through the darkness of men's minds and opens them up to the God of glory, the God of the universe, and to a resurrected Lord who, risen from the dead, seizes the scepter of universal empire, their hearts respond, and they believe.

Here is one such, Dionysius the Areopagite. He was one of the judges, an intellectual, a ruler of the city, but he became a Christian. With him was a woman named Damaris.

I am glad that Luke included the name, here, of a woman, for this indicated again that these Greek women were searching for answers in the midst of the pagan darkness in which they lived.

There were others among them. We do not know how many, perhaps just a few. Athens was much more resistant than any other city would be (a university city always is), but there were some who believed.

Here then is a church planted in Athens. We never hear anything about it again, although I suspect that the letters to the Corinthians were also shared with the church in Athens, because the cities were not very far apart. Paul addresses the Corinthian letters to "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus," {cf, 1 Cor 1:2b RSV}. We do not know what happened to the church at Athens except that here, in the midst of this darkness, the light of Jesus Christ began to shine, and a body was formed. From that body, power began

to penetrate into the secluded areas of darkness where evil sat entrenched within this great intellectual capital of the world, and to shake men loose, and to set them free from the chains of darkness.

May God grant that this may be true in our day, where there is evident so much of the same idolatry that enslaved the people of Athens.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray for our own age, our own generation, our own world. We know how men have pursued the emptiness of pagan philosophies in our day and how men are trying to satisfy the emptiness within with some lesser concept than you. They can never do so and are therefore rendered restless and unhappy, never finding what they are looking for. Others are resistant to this message, Lord, preening themselves in their intellectual pride, trying to find their own way by the power of reason. Father, we pray that everywhere this great message may have its effect as it did on Athens, and that our age, our darkened society will be set free from its bondage to materialism and made to be what you intended us to be -- warm, whole, balanced, happy, excited, and alive as Jesus Christ intends men and women to be today. We ask it in his name, Amen.

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