

Sermon Follow-up | May 3, 2020

1 Book of History — The Witness of Paul

Focus Passage: Acts 17:16–34

Corollary Scripture: Acts 14:8–23 describe Paul engaging another group of idol-worshippers who knew nothing about the LORD God.

Other Passages Referenced: Isaiah 49:6; Acts 21:37-22:21 (Paul’s witness by telling his own story); Galatians 4:8

Sermon Recap: God never wastes waiting. We find the Apostle Paul waiting in Athens for his coworkers Timothy and Silas to return and accompany him. While in Athens, Paul saw a city filled with idols. Many Athenians were highly educated but knew nothing about Jesus and the One true living God. Paul felt troubled as “his spirit was provoked within him” (Acts 17:16). Yet, he did not fight with but faithfully engaged the idol-worshippers. He engaged whomever he encountered in the marketplace with gospel-centered reasoning and dialogue. He engaged the Epicureans by declaring that God was more powerful than they imagined (transcendent). He connected with the Stoics by saying God was more personal than they imagined (immanent). Paul’s message logically reasoned that if we are God’s offspring, then we are not able to make God in our image, but God who has made us in His image. When that is properly understood, we turn away from other objects of worship to worship the Lord of heaven and earth. Paul even quoted the Grecian’s own pagan poets to state his case. During our current time of “waiting,” might the LORD be confronting our idols? “An idol is whatever you look at and say in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure’” (Tim Keller). Paul encouraged his listeners to turn from powerless and impersonal idols to the all-powerful and deeply personal God, made known in Jesus Christ.

Study Helps

- The Areopagus – F. F. Bruce explains that the Areopagus was not just a place but also a council, similar to the Senate or City Council. Among other things, this influential group decided which gods were to be accepted and which to be rejected as part of the Greek Pantheon (Bruce, *Book of Acts*, 351-352). It appears the people believed Paul’s teaching about Jesus and the resurrection was introducing two new gods that were not in their pantheon of gods. Therefore, they wanted to hear from him about these “foreign divinities” and “new teachings” (Acts 17:18–19).
- The audience in the Areopagus was largely represented by two predominant schools of philosophy—Epicureanism and Stoicism. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was the father of the Epicurean philosophical and ethical worldview. Pleasure was the goal in life for the Epicureans; this pleasure was at its height when persons attained freedom from passions and superstitious fears. The gods epitomized these virtues by staying transcendent, detached, and showing no interest in human beings. In contrast, Zeno of Cyprus (ca. 340-265 BCE) was the founder of the Stoic school of thought. “The Stoics were basically panentheists, believing there was a divine rational ordering principle that was in all things and beings. God’s relationship to the world was seen as analogous to that between the soul and the body” (Ben Witherington, *Acts*, 514). The gods were immanently present everywhere for the Stoics. Paul’s message finds points of contact and contradiction with both the Epicurean and Stoic worldviews.

Group ~~Gathering~~ Interaction

Connect: Making Honest Connections with One Another (Pick one)

1. Please share briefly one of the following:
 - a. What you most look forward to doing when physical-distancing isn't needed.
 - b. An encouraging conversation you had.
 - c. What has God been saying to you through His word, the sermon, or other people?

Grow: Listening to and Learning from God's Word

Read Acts 17:16–34

1. Paul is upset by the prevalent idolatry, but he doesn't confront his audience as "idolaters." What does he say to them in his introduction in the Areopagus (Acts 17:22)? ... How does he refer to their idols in Acts 17:23?

2. In contrast to Paul's approach in the synagogue where he generally presents Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul doesn't quote any Scripture verses to the biblically-unaware Athenians. However, he does communicate biblical truths. What truths about God can you list that Paul shares with the Areopagus?

3. How does Paul relate his message to the Epicureans who promoted transcendence of the gods and to the Stoics who believed in the immanence of the gods?

Serve: Serving King Jesus and Others, By Living Out and Letting Others Know God's Word

1. What observations have you made about our culture during this time of waiting for things to return to what we knew as normal?
2. Reflect on your answers to the Grow section questions about Paul's approach to idol worshippers who were totally unaware of the LORD God. Learning from Paul's approach, how might we introduce the LORD to the people in our lives who do not know or believe in the God revealed in the Bible?
3. Has this time of waiting helped you see any idols in your life more clearly? ... Elaborate.

Further Resources

- Bible Project –
 - Acts – <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/Series/181310?episode=48>
- Illustrations and quotes from the sermon can be found on the "Sermon Slides" link at the bottom of www.wcchapel.org