



St. Paul's Mars Hill Sermon

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St. Paul's Mars Hill Sermon by Brock McCoy
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-Background-

The apostle Paul was commissioned by Christ to carry the Gospel into the known world. Paul was led by the Holy Spirit on three major missionary journeys. Throughout each of the three journeys he endured various trials and tribulations. The event in consideration for the purpose of this Study Guide is found within Acts 17:16-34. This passage contains one of the most influential passages regarding Christian apologetics and evangelism, that is, Paul's sermon on Mars Hill.

During Paul's second of three missionary journeys he was led by the Holy Spirit through Galatia and into Macedonia. From there the apostle Paul traveled with Silas, Timothy, and possibly Luke down the coast of Aegean Sea preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There was much fruit throughout this missionary journey. However, with much success usually comes hardships and trials, this is what eventually led Paul into Athens, Greece. Paul was sent away by the brethren in Berea due to persecution and threats that had arisen. Therefore, Paul found himself within Athens preaching the Gospel for a certain period of time. Luke, the historian, recorded a condensed version of what transpired during Paul's time in Athens.

Paul entered one of the most influential and powerful cities from the ancient world. This city was full of idolatry, wickedness, and paganism. Therefore, it did not take long for the apostle Paul to become provoked into proclaiming the Gospel message. This text gives a perfect example of how a Christian today can present and live out the Gospel in a biblically illiterate context. The highlight of this passage is focused upon Paul's speech before the Areopagus. The Areopagus was a council of old that held great power within the city of Athens. The focal point of the speech is centered around Paul's usage of the Old Testament, logic, reason, Greek poetry, Greek religion, and his immediate context to present the Gospel.

-Introduction-

The book of Acts has continued to serve as the glue that holds together the Old Testament and the New Testament, Jesus and His apostles, Paul and Peter, and the Gospels with the Apostolic letters.¹ Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, composed Acts as an historical account of the early church. This account fits well within the genre of ancient historiography. As recorded throughout the book, Luke condensed several of the apostle Paul's speeches as was accustomed to ancient historians. Paul's speech in Athens has functioned as an archetypal representation of the perennial conflict between faith and philosophy since the early church fathers.²

In Acts 17, Luke recorded the ministry of the apostle Paul within Athens. This passage demonstrates how Paul stood inside the den of intellectualism and ancient philosophy with courage and commitment. This historical event has become widely known within the realm of Christian apologetics due to how Paul presented the gospel before the intellectuals of his day. Paul's Areopagus defense, recorded in Acts 17, has influenced the Christian church throughout the ages to stand firm and give a reasonable account for the truth of the gospel.

When examining this passage of Scripture, there is found a clear applicable outline for evangelism and apologetics today. Paul displayed how a Christian, even two thousand years after his own life, by the wisdom of God, should stand and defend the truth of Christ regardless of the context that he or she may be in. After a clear exegesis of this passage, Christians should be readily equipped to carry the gospel forward and give a clear defense of the truth when called upon by the world.

-Context-

Historical-Cultural Context

Authorship - Early Christian tradition identifies the author of the Third Gospel and Acts as Luke, ‘the beloved physician.’³ This has been the accepted consensus throughout church history partially due to manuscript evidence. The earliest statements pertaining to the authorship of Acts belongs to the last quarter of the second century.⁴ The earliest extant manuscripts of the Gospel (Papyrus 75), dated between AD 175 and 225, bears the ascription, ‘Gospel according to Luke.’⁵ The Muratorian Fragment contains an early Roman canon of Christian Scripture, detailing who the early church attributed the writings to.⁶ Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome all conclude that Luke was the author of Acts.⁷ Therefore, Luke, ‘the beloved physician,’ is the most reasonable author of this historical letter.

Dating - The dating of Acts ranges from AD 57 to possibly AD 150.⁸ There are three main viewpoints regarding the dating of Acts. First, many scholars date Acts before AD 64.⁹ Those who advocate for this view also appeal to other features within Acts, such as: the primitive theology of Peter’s speeches, the fact that there is no Neronian persecution (AD mid-sixties) is nowhere mentioned, and there are no mentions of Paul’s epistles.¹⁰ The “middle-dating” position holds the date of Acts between AD 70 and 90.¹¹ However, there are many questions that arise with Acts being written during this time frame.

The most difficult questions that arise from this dating, relate to the abrupt ending of the historiography. Why does the author not take the story up to the point of Paul’s trial or death?¹² The trial and death of Paul were of great significance. If Luke wrote Acts after these events occurred, it seems that he would have recorded something that important. Also, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem is another question that arises within this dating. Why would Luke not have mentioned the fulfillment of prophecy spoken by Jesus in Luke 21:5-6, if it had occurred during the time of the writing?

The “middle-dating” position does not date the letter based upon the events of the letter itself. Those who hold to the “late” dating of Acts are in a decided minority.¹³ These scholars believe that Luke depended upon the writings of the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, which were published in AD 93.¹⁴ However, in Acts there is too much evidence pointing to the letter being written before AD 70.

Purpose - During the period Acts was written, the gospel had been carried far and wide. Due to *Pax Romana* and Kione Greek, the message of Jesus and His resurrection had spread throughout much of the known world.¹⁵ There is no unanimity among scholars concerning Luke’s exact purpose in writing Acts.¹⁶ Some argue that the purpose of Acts is more apologetic than evangelistic.¹⁷ Luke’s purpose in writing Acts could be seen as a sophisticated attempt to explain and justify Christianity to the members of his community at a time when they were exposed to social and political pressures which were making their allegiance waver.¹⁸ The complexity of the book allows many different purposes.¹⁹ Also, many scholars are unable to identify a precise historical setting and occasion for the work.²⁰ Understanding the historical setting and purpose of Acts does face certain challenges unlike other books of the New Testament.

However, Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to record all that God had done through the Spirit, continuing what he had previously recorded in his Gospel.²¹ In a world that was dominated by imperial worship, Greek philosophy, pagan idolatry, and zealous Judaism, there was a great need for an account such as Acts. It fits into its historical framework as a road map leading men to the truth by providing a reliable account of the work of God through Christ, His Spirit, and His church.²²

Literary Context

Acts 17:16-33 occurred during Paul's second missionary journey between AD 49-52.²³ Leading up chapter 17, Paul previously traveled throughout Cyprus and Asia Minor, preaching to both the Jews and Gentiles between the years AD 47-48.²⁴ Chapters 11 through 14 contain all that Paul did during his first missionary journey. Acts 15:36 explains why Paul began his second missionary journey which inevitably led him to Athens. Paul was inspired by the Lord to go back through all the cities he had previously preached in.

Having traversed throughout the Phrygian and Galatian region, the Holy Spirit led Paul and his companions beyond Asia into Macedonia.²⁵ Sailing from Troas to Neapolis (16:11), Paul and his companions entered Macedonia with the gospel. In Philippi, Paul proclaimed the gospel to the Jews on the Sabbath, which led to Lydia and her household's salvation (16:14). Also, while in Philippi, Paul was arrested and beaten severely (16:23).

While in prison, Paul, and Silas were worshiping God when all of a sudden, the doors were opened (16:26). After leaving Philippi, they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia traveling to Thessalonica (17:1). Paul stood in the synagogue, reasoning with the Jews, which led to the conversion of many Greeks (17:4).

Being pushed out of the city by envious Jews, they were sent to Berea where they continued to preach the good news (17:10). Shortly after their arrival in Berea, they were forced to leave due to certain Jews who followed them from Thessalonica (17:13). However, many Jews accepted the gospel in Berea unlike those in Thessalonica (17:12). Upon the arrival of the envious Jews from Thessalonica, Paul was sent to Athens awaiting Silas and Timothy (17:5).

The immediate context prior to Acts 17:16 demonstrates God's hand of protection over His church. Paul faced many challenges throughout his first and second missionary journey. Certain Jews, government officials, and Gentiles all sought to prevent Paul from accomplishing what God called him to do.

One of the greatest questions of early Christianity concerns how the followers of a crucified Jew were transformed into a worldwide movement that still exist today.²⁶ Leading up to Acts 17, the power of the gospel had reached rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male, and female.²⁷ All of this was accomplished by the protection and provision of God. God is solely responsible for the church's existence and for its continued growth.²⁸

Athens Upon Paul's Arrival

Athens was an ancient city of the Greek empire that contained some of the greatest philosophers of all time. Before the formation of Alexandria, Athens was the intellectual center for Greek thought.²⁹ The Greeks are known as some of the greatest philosophers to have ever lived. In fact, "Philosophy" is a word invented by the ancient Greeks, most likely by Pythagoras.³⁰ The Greek philosophy that has impacted the world today was fueled by dissatisfaction with traditional mythological explanations.³¹ Athens was a city that had a drive for knowledge and understanding.

Athens was a Greek imperial city located about 100 miles east of Corinth and roughly 200 miles northeast of Sparta.³² The city of Athens was positioned on the southern portion of Attica. Attica was an ancient district of Greece situated alongside the Aegean Sea.³³ The geographical region Athens was in provided great advantages. Today much of the ancient city of Athens is unfortunately buried underneath the earth or in a museum.

However, the flattened Acropolis is a major tourist attraction in the twenty first century. Much of the ruined monuments that once made up the city of Athens can be seen from atop the flattened Acropolis.³⁴ Parts of the Parthenon, Erchtheum, Propylaea, and the Temple of Wingless Victory are also still standing.³⁵ These structures at one time were the center of all political, social, and religious activity in Greece. Today these structures are empty and lifeless, representing the ancient civilization that once occupied them. However, when the apostle Paul brought the gospel into Athens it was very much alive.

After the collapse of the Greek empire, the Roman empire-controlled Athens. It was during this time that the apostle Paul was able to bring the gospel to Athens due to Pax Romana. Roman peace, along with the effects of Hellenization, made it easy for the gospel to spread during this time. With Roman control and maritime trade, the ancient Greek city became a melting pot for ideas, cultures, and religions. The temples and marketplaces were filled with men trading ideas about various systems of belief. When Paul traveled to Athens, he entered the lion's den of intellectualism and debate.

Within Athens there were many pagan worshipers as seen in Acts 17. Luke recorded that there were numerous alters built to the various gods being worshiped in Athens while Paul was there. On top of the Greek mythology, pagan worship, and deification of Roman emperors, there were countless philosophical groups circulating. The apostle Paul faced men who had most likely been brought up hearing about Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Socrates, and Plato.³⁶ Therefore, he faced a challenge that he most likely would have never faced having stayed in Jerusalem.

There is little information about what was happening philosophically in Athens from the time Cicero studied there, until around 66 AD.³⁷ Although, through various documents such as the New Testament, a picture of Athens can be painted. The city was full of pagan worship that was growing and changing daily. After the process of Hellenization, Paganism and polytheism became very flexible.³⁸ There were new divinities that were continually reshaping the old ones.³⁹ This may explain why the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers questioned Paul saying, "What does this babblers want to say?" (Acts 17:18). There was a great mixture of religious beliefs in Athens that conflicted with monotheism.

Paul faced a very difficult audience as he stood in the marketplace of Athens two thousand years ago (Acts 14:17). Today Greek mythology is depicted in movies and plays. However, in Paul's day, it was very much a present reality. Paul could have tried to avoid going to Athens due to its powerful reputation. The stoic philosophers, great temples, and pagan tradition posed a great challenge to Paul. He could have chosen to run from Athens like Jonah ran from Nineveh. Instead, he chose to enter the great city of Athens and proclaim, "Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you", (Acts 17:23).

Athens is responsible for producing some of the greatest intellectual ideas in the world today. Its setting made for a beautiful scene from atop the Acropolis.⁴⁰ It was also the most religious of all the ancient Greeks' cities according to ancient Greek writings.⁴¹ The people that occupied Athens in the first century were very superstitious, believing that every little change was due to an unhappy god.⁴² The religious mindset, along with the rich history of the Greek people, played a great factor in what Paul said as he stood before the Areopagus.

-The Sermon-

Verses 16 and 17

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. (Acts 17:16-17)

Idolatry is something Luke wants the Gentiles to turn away from throughout Acts. The speech in Athens recorded in Acts 17 helped emphasize this truth.⁴³ Upon Paul's entrance into Athens, he was overwhelmed by the idolatry that had taken over the city. As a Hellenist Jew, Paul would already know much about the place. Although, knowing about something and seeing it firsthand are very different. What he only heard about previously, he then saw firsthand. According to Acts 14:16, God had now opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.⁴⁴ Being filled with the Spirit and commissioned by God to take the gospel to the Gentiles, Paul could not resist from preaching the gospel as he entered such a pagan city.

Eight hundred years of Greek mythology and five hundred years of Greek philosophy came and went. Athens proved as the intellectual capital of the world that knowledge and intellectualism was incapable of finding God.⁴⁵ Paul saw Athens through the vantage point of Christ.⁴⁶ The proportions of the Parthenon and the perfection of Pheidias's sculpture had no appeal to Paul.⁴⁷ He was stirred up within his spirit due to the depravity of the people.

For Paul, being as zealous and monotheistic as he was, the scene was not appealing to him at all.⁴⁸ In verse 16, Luke used the Greek word (*paroxyno*) to explain Paul's reaction to the idolatry he witnessed.⁴⁹ This word reveals that Paul was extremely frustrated by the idolatry that he was surrounded by. However, this great amount of idolatry was nothing new to Paul. He saw it in the streets of Tarsus as a child; it was also present in Damascus, Antioch, and all the cities he had previously entered.⁵⁰ Paul, knowing all that Christ had just accomplished on the cross, could not help but be moved for the people of Athens.

Paul began to reason in the synagogues with the Jews, with the Gentile worshipers, and with anyone who would listen in the marketplaces. Jews that were dispersed throughout the known world could not travel to the temple in Jerusalem at the drop of a hat. Therefore, places of Jewish worship called 'synagogues' began to form.⁵¹ Within the synagogues there was no altar. Prayer and the reading of the law took the place of altar sacrifice. In the synagogues Paul met with those who shared his feelings about idolatry and false religion.⁵² Although, they needed the gospel just as much as the gentile worshipers who were unaware of the Old Testament promises.

Paul also reasoned with anyone who would listen in the marketplace. The marketplace was one of the prime locations to be heard by a multitude of people passing in and out all day long. In the Greco-Roman times, the marketplace was the hub of urban life. It was a center for commerce and trade, but also for sharing new ideas and knowledge.⁵³

The Athenian Agora (marketplace) was full of temples, government buildings, shops, offices, and altars.⁵⁴ It was here that Paul faced certain worldviews and philosophies that were the opposite of his own. Paul's method of evangelism could in some way be compared to the late Socrates.⁵⁵ Socrates was always ready and available to converse with anyone who was willing to speak with him in the marketplace.⁵⁶ On the Sabbath Paul reasoned with the Jews and during the weekdays he reasoned with the Gentiles in the Agora.⁵⁷ There is no indication of how long this continued until Paul was carried

before the Areopagus. This goes to show the commitment and dedication that Paul had for the Athenians to be saved.

Verse 18

Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection. (Acts 17:18)

As Paul stood reasoning in the Agora he was approached by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Epicureanism and Stoicism were both major schools of thought within Athens during the first century. Both began around the fourth century B.C. and continued for several centuries.⁵⁸ The way Epicureans and Stoics viewed the world differed tremendously from the way Paul did. Therefore, Paul's preaching of the resurrection conflicted with their worldviews.

Epicureanism was a philosophical school of thought created by Epicurus of Samos in the fourth century B.C.⁵⁹ Epicureans believed that the gods had no relation to mankind. Therefore, man needed not worry about pleasing the gods.⁶⁰ They held to the belief that there is no afterlife nor resurrection. As a result of this, they believed that the purpose of life was pleasure and the avoidance of pain.⁶¹ Epicureans did not attribute the origin and development of the universe to the gods, but rather to natural explanations.⁶² Because of this they were often accused of atheism and sensuality.⁶³

The philosophical school of Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium.⁶⁴ Stoicism was based upon divine reason (*logos*). Stoics believed that reason was the guide to human behavior and ethics.⁶⁵ In their eyes the best life was spent pursuing wisdom and knowledge.

Both philosophies placed a great gap between humanity and the plurality of gods worshiped by the Athenian people. They believed that God was not personal nor relevant to human life and ethic.⁶⁶ Both groups denied a universal afterlife and resurrection for the most part. Therefore, Paul's preaching conflicted with their understanding of the universe, morality, and the supernatural. This is what drove them to converse with Paul as he stood preaching the resurrection of Christ.

In response to the gospel, they spoke saying, "what does this babbler want to say?" (17:18). They used the term *spermologos* to describe Paul and his message.⁶⁷ This label was used to describe men who picked up scraps of information from others.⁶⁸ A natural example would be a bird gathering scraps that have fallen to the ground.

They were in a way accusing him of retailing a falsified religion that no intelligent man would believe.⁶⁹ Athens was a city filled with men continuously speaking about new religious ideas and concepts. For these philosophers to hear someone babbling about something new was not uncommon. However, the message that Paul preached caused them to recognize something different from what they normally heard in the marketplace.⁷⁰

In the later part of verse 18, Luke explained why the philosophers were drawn to Paul's message. Paul proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers could not understand the resurrection. The Epicureans did not believe in the afterlife as mentioned above. Therefore, the idea of a bodily resurrection was foreign to them both. They believed Paul was referring to news gods named Jesus and the goddess named resurrection (*Anastasia*).⁷¹ By misunderstanding the resurrection they made Paul out to be polytheistic preacher.⁷² Paul later corrected this misunderstanding as he stood before the Areopagus.

Verses 19-21

And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is? For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.) (Acts 17:19-21)

Those who Paul reasoned with in the Agora brought him before the Areopagus. The Areopagus was initially a council of elders named for its meeting place on or by the “hill of Ares.”⁷³ The hill of Ares was named after Ares, the Greek god of war.⁷⁴ Long before the Roman empire conquered Greece, this aristocratic council had authority over both politics and justice, for it also served as a court.⁷⁵ It is important to notice that Paul’s preaching had such an impact within the city that it even caught the attention of the Areopagus.

Paul’s preaching should not be thought of as a silent whisper or the sound of a voice being drowned out by the sound of others. Instead, it should be thought of as powerful, bold, and courageous proclamation amid a dying and lost people. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were struck by the different message that Paul preached as mentioned above. They even went as far as to call the message that he preached “strange doctrine,” which they had never heard. By the way Luke described the entire scene it can be concluded that Paul found himself in another adversarial situation.⁷⁶ The grammar that Luke used in describing this event reflects malice and aggression being shown towards the apostle Paul from the Athenian philosophers.⁷⁷

The Areopagus was responsible for maintaining the religious customs within the city, which Paul seemed to be tapering with. Therefore, it can be concluded that this encounter was not a formal trial but rather an initial hearing, because the word was out that Paul was proclaiming foreign gods seeking access into the Athenian Pantheon.⁷⁸ Luke’s description of the Athenians sets the framework for the audience that Paul had encountered. Luke explained that these men spent all their time bouncing new ideas off one another day in and day out. Therefore, when they heard something as unique and unusual as the message Paul preached, they were quick to jump on it.

Verses 22-23

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. (Acts 17:22-23)

Moving into verse 22, Paul’s address before the Areopagus becomes the focal point of Luke’s writing in the chapter. Paul’s speech before the Areopagus is one of the most used passages in the New Testament when referring to apologetics. The apostle Paul used reason and logic to present the good news of Christ to the men of Athens. Paul began using his surroundings to persuade men of the gospel.

As Paul stood amid the council, he recognized that they, along with the city of Athens, were very religious. All their structures and buildings were dedicated to various gods or imperial leaders. The Parthenon and the temple dedicated to Roma and Augustus could not be missed. The city itself was named after the goddess Athena.⁷⁹ Petronius, a contemporary of Paul, had a character in the *Satyricon* state that in Athens, “it is easier to meet a god in the street than a human.”⁸⁰ Paul acknowledged the Athenians religiosity with an expression translated, “the most religious.” This Greek term literally

means “fearing the gods;” and can be used positively or negatively.⁸¹ The Athenian audience could have been flattered by Paul’s opening statement.

However, coming from Paul, it may have indicated disapproval without prematurely antagonizing his audience.⁸² Paul’s initial reaction to the vast amount of idolatry seen in verse 16 should be taken into consideration when evaluating his opening statement.⁸³ Paul calling the men of Athens “very religious” should be taken in the negative sense rather than the positive.

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers would have agreed with Paul’s initial statement regarding the immense amount of superstition within the city.⁸⁴ Therefore, Paul began his discourse using what was in front of him to present the gospel.⁸⁵ In verse 23, Paul appealed to the variety of religious objects that surrounded him to begin his case. Paul mentions that he has carefully observed all the shrines, temples, statues, and alters throughout the city.⁸⁶ While walking throughout the city, Paul came across a particular alter that was dedicated to the “Unknown God.” The Athenians erected this alter out of fear they might offend or miss some deity they were unaware of or failed to give proper worship to.⁸⁷ Paul asserts that this god who the Athenians worship as “unknown” is the God he proclaims.⁸⁸

Thus, Paul is not introducing a new deity as accused in verse 18; rather, he is declaring a divine being that is already present in the city.⁸⁹ Here Paul starts with his hearers’ belief in an impersonal divine essence, pantheistically conceived, and leads them to the living God.⁹⁰ This alter both testifies to the Athenians’ rudimentary awareness of the God proclaimed by Paul and confesses that this God is unknown in Athens.⁹¹

Paul used his immediate context to present the gospel to the Athenian council. By recognizing the culture, setting, and practices of the people around him, Paul was able to find the way to present the gospel clearly and accurately in a way the people would be able to understand. Paul could not speak in the same way he spoke to the Jews as recorded in verse 17 and elsewhere. Therefore, Paul found a way to present the gospel to a Biblically illiterate people.

Verses 24-25

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things. (Acts 17:24-25)

It is important to note Paul’s lofty view of God as he began this speech. God, whom Paul is defending, is the Creator of all that the Athenians study so intently.⁹² In verse 24, Paul challenged Stoic pantheism, Epicurean materialism, and the vast religious paganism that surrounded him.⁹³ The way in which Paul presented God superseded what the Athenians were used to. Paul stated that the God of the Hebrews was the one true God that could not be created nor contained by human hands.

The inclusivity in Paul’s presentation of YHWH was meant to narrow their understanding of God to one instead of many. It was this distinguishing point that set the one true God apart from the false. For the Athenians divinity was to be found in the heavens, in nature, and in humanity. The idea of a single supreme being who stood over the world, who created all that exists, was totally foreign to them.⁹⁴ The Stoics in Paul’s audience would have in some ways been ok with Paul’s presentation of God being that they themselves believed in creation. However, Paul would have been concerned with their easy transition from “god” to the “gods.”⁹⁵

Paul then insisted that because God is the Creator of all things, He does not live in temples made with human hands. This was something that the Stoicism, Platonism, and certain other Greek poets already agreed upon.⁹⁶ Paul, however, was not appealing to their classical writings for this truth, but rather the Old Testament Scriptures that certain Athenians happened to agree with already. The affinities of the terms used in this verse by Paul are biblical rather than classical.⁹⁷ Up to this point the audience would have agreed with Paul in some ways. Although, there was still a world of difference between Paul's monotheism and the Greek's pantheism.⁹⁸

In verse 25, Paul addressed the confusion between the one true God and the location or image that humans create to make Him like us. Paul intended for them to recognize that God is not to be understood in anthropomorphic terms – as being essentially like us.⁹⁹ Paul's reference to God giving life and breath was derived from Isaiah 42:5 where the prophet spoke saying, “Thus says the Lord God who created the heaven and stretched it out, who spread out the earth and everything in it and who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.”¹⁰⁰

Paul desired for the Athenians to understand that the God of Israel is the one true God who created all things in the universe. Paul argued that God cannot possibly be formed and worshiped as an idol in a temple made by human hands if He created the hands Himself. This point of conflict was not foreign to Paul in any way.

Paul had previously seen idol worship in other Greek cities as well as pagan worship outside of Macedonia. As a Jew, Paul was also very well educated in the Old Testament Scriptures and was aware of Israel's previous stints with idol worship in the past. Therefore, Paul's argument and presentation of God and Christ was built upon the Old Testament Scriptures, Christ's fulfillment of those Scriptures, and logic pertaining to God's omnipotence. To know the one true God the Athenians had to abandon all their other gods. Otherwise, He would remain to them the “Unknown God.”¹⁰¹

Verses 26-27

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us. (Acts 17:26-27)

Moving forward into his defense, Paul began to focus on the description of God as the Creator of humanity.¹⁰² Working from this premise, Paul illustrated God's personal care and plan for human beings. In verse 26, Paul pulled humanity back to one common ancestor in Adam. The Greeks, particularly the Athenians, saw themselves as superior to all other peoples. They considered themselves to be greater than non-Greeks, whom they called barbarians.¹⁰³ Paul, however, left no room for a theory of race superiority by drawing all people back to one ancestor.¹⁰⁴

Verse 26 directly reflects what God spoke in Genesis 1:28-29. God has called all men to multiply, spread, and rule the earth which He has created. Paul used this foundation to overcome any sense of superiority the Athenians may have held to. All men have been created to serve and glorify God. Paul's argument for one common ancestor and commission placed all men on equal ground before God their Creator. Therefore, all genetic codes, which blueprint the differences between races, can be traced back to Adam.¹⁰⁵ Paul then goes on to explain that God has also determined the boundaries and dwelling places for the entire world.

Paul intended for the Athenians to recognize God's sovereignty over all things. God has both determined and appointed certain nations and peoples to rule and control certain geographical locations at certain times.¹⁰⁶ The pagan polytheistic religion of the Athenians was completely counter

to this truth. The polytheistic Athenians respected and worshiped a plurality of gods that each ruled over various geographical locations. However, if Paul's monotheistic proclamation is true, that would mean that all men under heaven should be worshiping the one true God instead of many. Therefore, there is a collective responsibility and privilege that is shared by humanity in God's creation.¹⁰⁷ The schism between Paul's message and the religious beliefs of the day was far and wide.

Verse 27 contains the beginning of hope for not only the Athenians in the 1st century, but also all of mankind throughout history. In verse 27, Paul explained the reason why God has done what He has done in creation. God has worked to draw humanity unto Himself throughout history by various means. Paul asserted that humanity was created by God so that people are in fellowship with Him.¹⁰⁸

The Greek word ζῆτεῖν in verse 27, explains the second purpose of God's creation. It is a statement based upon the nature of humanity; created to seek God.¹⁰⁹ Essentially, Paul is stating that the purpose of creation was for mankind to seek after God and have fellowship with Him. God made humanity to dwell on the earth (17:26) and to seek him (17:27).¹¹⁰ Many ancient thinkers argued that nature placed a longing for truth in the human soul. Many also argued that knowledge about the deity was innate in humans; an ability to recognize the divine stamp in nature distinguished rational beings from what was not rational.¹¹¹

The belief that all peoples shared a concept of deity, no matter how "uncivilized" or "barbarous" such peoples might be, was a widespread ancient argument for the deity's existence.¹¹² The Stoics within Paul's audience would have been in agreement with Paul as he spoke about seeking the Divine.¹¹³ They believed that divine principle was to be found in all of nature and that one could come to the knowledge of a divinity throughout reason and logic.¹¹⁴

Paul, however, disagreed with such philosophy. Paul elaborated on God's revelation elsewhere throughout his own epistles and writings. The difference in Paul's understanding of revelation and the philosophers was that Paul taught that man could know God exists by nature but not know Him personally. Whereas other ancient thinkers believed the opposite, that one could come to know the divine through nature and reason alone without revelation. The conditional clause, "in the hope that" is found in the optative mood, which expresses some doubt or uncertainty.¹¹⁵ Paul is therefore describing a potential that was not fulfilled in the Athenian situation.¹¹⁶

Verses 28-29

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. (Acts 17:28-29)

Paul used three verbs in verse 28 to describe humanity's existence. Humans live, move, and have being through the provision of God. Paul wanted them to understand that it was God who created and sustained them. The Areopagus council would have understood the triadic formulation in terms of the life, the movement, and the existence of humankind "in God" in a pantheistic sense, i.e., in terms of the immanence of all human beings in the all-pervasive divine principle.¹¹⁷ The first phrase of this verse fits well with the Stoic and Platonic cosmology of the day.¹¹⁸

In the second part of verse 28, Paul appealed to the secular religious writings of the Greeks that supported his own argument. Paul used a quotation from Aratus of Soli in Cilicia (ca. 300 BC) to emphasize that human beings are not only close to God but related to him as his kin.¹¹⁹ Paul is not teaching that all men are God's children. Instead, Paul is saying that all men are related to God, being that He is their Creator. Once again, Paul framed his argument in such a way so that the Athenians

could see the similarities, while at the same time recognize the unique differences. By quoting ancient poetry, Paul was not intimating that he agreed with the pagan setting in which the citation flourished.¹²⁰ He is also not suggesting that God be viewed in terms of Greek polytheism or Stoic pantheism.¹²¹

Paul simply understood the historical culture and context of the Greeks, which he then used to direct them to the truth. Thereafter Paul explained the creation of God, His sustainability of all things, and His relation to man. He then explained how men ought to respond to these truths. Being created in the image of God, all men should not think of deity in terms of gold, silver, or stone, as all ancient civilizations have done throughout history.¹²² God, being far beyond all human innovation and invention, cannot be compared to the precious commodities He Himself has made.¹²³ Instead, men should worship the one true God who transcends all man-made idols and temples.

Verses 30-31

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

Ignorance about God was less culpable than deliberate distortions about Him but given God's self-revelation of His character in humanity (17:27-28), idolatry remained culpable (17:29), and now, given the climatic and more complete revelation of His purpose in the historic act of raising Jesus, it became inexcusable (17:31).¹²⁴ The overlooking seen within verse 30, is not referring to sin. Paul was not implying that God, in time past, had overlooked sin due to a lack of personal revelation.

The overlooking here is the specific season of ignorance regarding who God is.¹²⁵ This new stage in salvation history now calls all Gentiles into account along with the Jews.¹²⁶ God, having overlooked the nations ignorance, has now commanded all men to turn to Him after all He accomplished through the incarnation of His Son. The coming of Christ marked a fresh start in God's dealings with humanity.¹²⁷ In the present place, God's overlooking of people's earlier ignorance of Himself is seen to have had in view the full revelation now given in the advent and work of Christ.¹²⁸

Being that God had previously overlooked the ignorance of the nations, He now commands them to repent. This command included the Stoics, Epicureans, Jews, Gentiles, and the Areopagus council members. Christ proclaimed this very same message throughout His own ministry. Christ called the multitudes to repent for the kingdom of God was at hand (Matthew 4:17).

Paul declared that now God demands the conversion of all people in the entire world.¹²⁹ This universal call to repentance supports the very same universal salvific call that Christ spoke to Nicodemus about saying, "whosoever believeth in Me shall not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The call to repentance is not limited to some, but open to all who will trust in Christ.

The universal call that Paul proclaimed was founded upon the resurrection of Christ. In verse 31, Paul shifts the perspective from God the Creator to God the righteous Judge.¹³⁰ Paul concluded his defense warning the council of the coming judgement. He declared that God would judge all men everywhere by the standard of righteousness, that is, His Son. It goes without saying that the judgement of the one true God who created the heavens and earth will be with justice, i.e., it will be fair.¹³¹ The Greek word for "judge" is the word κρίνω, which translates, "I judge." This word is used throughout the New Testament in reference to judging one's neighbor, discerning a problem, or judicial and divine judgement.¹³² In this context, it is certain that the judgement Paul is referring to is of eternal significance. This judgement will be fair based upon the character and revelation of God.

All men will be held accountable for their sin. In the end, there will be ultimate justice and vengeance on this day of judgement. Only those who have repented and trusted the “Man,” whom God raised from the dead, will be saved on that day. Human beings can judge other human beings, but not the entire human race; a universal judge must have special proof that he has the necessary credentials.¹³³ Therefore, Paul concluded this speech by directly connecting the work of God and the work of Christ. In order for the Athenians to be delivered from the coming judgement, they had no other option but to turn from their idolatry and submit to the resurrected Christ.

-Conclusion-

The audience then began to mock Paul, and his message concerning the resurrection of the dead. All of them except the Epicureans would have agreed with him had he spoken of the immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection.¹³⁴ In the closing of the argument, Paul circled back to his original premise, that is, the resurrection. Depending on how the audience felt toward Paul’s initial presuppositions in the beginning of the speech, dictated how they responded at the end of his speech.¹³⁵ Although, some members of the council did not ridicule Paul and his message. Instead, they delayed their final consensus to a later time like that of Felix (24:25).¹³⁶

It is unique that some members of the audience not only wanted to hear Paul’s message again but believed in the message of the Gospel. The fact that Paul even had any convert and believe his message is amazing amidst such a pagan audience marked by polytheism, mythology, and philosophy. However, the Gospel is the power unto salvation for all men who will believe (Rom. 1:16).

Those who wanted to hear Paul again passively granted him access to continue preaching his message by saying they wanted to hear him again in another formal meeting.¹³⁷ This indicated that Paul was able to continue preaching and teaching the resurrection of Christ within Athens. Among those who believed was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus itself and Damaris, a woman whose background is not specified. According to the bishop of Corinth in the second century, Dionysius was the first bishop of Athens.¹³⁸ Damaris, being mentioned by name, may indicate that she played an important role in the church of Athens. Nevertheless, it is significant that Luke mentioned her name while not specifying the “others with them.” The Good News had penetrated through the wall of intellectualism and Greek religion as demonstrated in this historical account. It is important to recognize the response of the people as the account concludes.

Regardless of the outcome, Paul proclaimed the truth, reasoned, and persuaded men to repent and turn to Christ. Every ear that heard the message of the resurrection responded in one of three ways. First, they chose to reject and mock the Gospel message Paul preached. Second, they may have chosen to hear the message again another time and put it off for the time being. Lastly, they chose to believe and obey the Gospel message.

For the Christian today this account provides great hope and assurance regarding evangelism and apologetics. This account demonstrates that it is not up to the believer to save anyone. All the believer is responsible for doing is sharing the message of hope. Whether men respond or not, that does not dictate victory or loss in the life of the testifier. Regardless of the outcome the believer is always victorious when sharing the good news of Christ. Some will believe and some will not. It is simply the Christian’s job to stand and proclaim the wondrous works of God.

-Application-

As with any message ever preached, the application is what the hearer can relate to and apply his or her life. When examining this historical account there are many points that can be applied in the life of the

believer today. Paul's sermon before the Areopagus serves as a great example for witnessing in a biblically illiterate culture. The initial point of contact within Paul's address begins where his audience is and builds on as much territory as possible.¹³⁹ Paul modeled what contextualized preaching should look like amid a lost community.¹⁴⁰ Paul Copan and Kenneth Litwak explained Paul's contextualization best in their book "The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas," saying:

We have seen that Paul's message at Athens wasn't at all wrong-headed. Rather, it was an astutely contextualized presentation of the gospel. Paul masterfully wove together issues and concerns pertinent to both the Stoics and the Epicureans in his audience, all within a solidly Christian framework. Paul's speech was anchored in the Old Testament Scriptures, and he affirmed that the one true God is Creator of all things, that idolatry is theologically misguided and that God's agent in the world is Christ the risen Lord, who calls for all without exception to repent.¹⁴¹

Today Christians should be **aware of their immediate context**. Understanding who is on the receiving side of the Gospel is important when trying to be as effective as possible. The truth of the good news must never change. However, the way in which it is presented may vary based upon context and audience. There are different ways to approach different people when witnessing for Christ.

For example, one might take a different route in presenting the gospel to a professor of philosophy compared to presenting the Gospel to a tribal leader in Africa. As demonstrated by Paul, the message of the resurrection never changes. However, the way the Christian builds up to deliver that message should be tailored and dictated by a proper understanding of his or her immediate context.

Within the beginning of this account there lies a profound point of application for the believer today. In (17:16), Luke recorded that Paul was "provoked" when he saw the idolatry within the city of Athens. Paul was moved by the lostness and depravity of his immediate context. It burdened him to see men so desperate for hope, answers, and meaning. Therefore, he began to share that hope with those around him. If there is one point that the believer can take away from this text it is this, without **a burden for the lost** all the wisdom and knowledge of God within a believer's heart is found useless as far as the kingdom is concerned. Just as Paul was burdened for the lostness of his community, so should the Christian be today for his.

Following alongside Paul's contextualization comes his understanding of various worldviews. As modeled in his speech, Paul's understanding of Greek poetry and thought enabled him to relate to the Areopagus. He demonstrated that a good understanding of other's worldviews helps in relating the gospel to those of different backgrounds and cultures. For a Christian to be effective today, it is important to have somewhat of any understanding of the worldviews that differ from Christianity such as: Islam, New Age, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Atheism. By **understanding what other people believe** the Christian is better suited to reason and persuade them to trust in Christ.

The **courage and commitment to the gospel message** is also a major point of application that comes out of this text. Paul had every reason and excuse to not share the Gospel. The city that he was in was full of wickedness and rebellion. It would have been very easy to simply walk away saying "they'll never listen." However, he went courageously enduring whatever came upon him. Regardless of the outcome Paul went into that city and lived faithfully with the time he was allotted.

Today, the Christian cannot allow his context to dictate whether he is faithful or not. The Christian today should not be intimidated by those who may be deemed more intelligent or knowledgeable by the world's standards. Christ is always with His elect regardless of where they find themselves throughout life. Therefore, the Christian must be confident and motivated to live as a witness where he is today knowing that the fruit of his ministry is in the hands of Christ, not his own.

There are many more points of application that can be drawn from this passage of Scripture as seen throughout the ages. Those listed above are just a few that are commonly recognized when examining this text. There is much to be taken from this text along with the rest of Acts as a whole. The early church had a great desire and motivation to spread the Gospel to all men throughout the known world so that people could be saved. It was a desire for the lost to know Christ that initiated this event in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. All Christians should recognize this truth and seek to apply this same desire and mindset to their life. The world is assuredly running out of time as Christ Himself spoke saying, "Surely I am coming quickly" (Rev. 22:20).

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