

Acts 17:22-34

1. Observation and exposition
2. The take-away for us?

Observation and exposition

1. Read the passage [SLIDES]
2. Observation and exposition
 - a. The time and setting [SLIDES]
 - i. 49-50 A.D. (See Acts 18:2 and the timeline chart)
 - ii. How old is Christianity by this point?
 - b. Is this Paul's complete message to the Areopagus?
 - i. Commentators seem to think that it's a summary, since it's so short. Summary or complete text, it is what the Holy Spirit wanted Luke to record.
 - c. Paul does not cite or refer to any specific OT passages like he did when speaking to Jews, but his message is thoroughly biblical, and reads like a condensed summary of the entire Bible, from beginning to end, creation to final judgment.
 - i. Identify the themes and/or attributes of God on the whiteboard?
 1. Themes
 - a. Creation
 - b. Providence (sustaining life)
 - c. Salvation
 - d. Final judgment
 2. God's attributes
 - a. Eternality
 - b. Omnipotence
 - c. Omniscience
 - d. Sovereignty
 - e. Omnipresence
 - f. Love
 - d. What can we benefit from studying this passage in particular?
 - i. A reminder of who God is, what he has done, and what he will do.
 - ii. A template (example) for us to use in evangelism in and to our culture.

- iii. A check to see where we're at with idolatry:
 1. "Paul's argument is a challenge to all forms of religion which seek to make a god to suit the needs of the worshippers. Moreover, idolatry can take many forms, both intellectually (with false ideas about God) and practically (with the worship of created things rather than the Creator)." Peterson, 501 [SLIDE]
 2. "Idols are not limited to primitive societies; there are many sophisticated idols too. An idol is a god-substitute. Any person or thing that occupies the place which God should occupy is an idol. Covetousness is idolatry. Ideologies can be idolatries. So can fame, wealth and power, sex, food, alcohol and other drugs, parents, spouse, children and friends, work, recreation, television and possessions, even church, religion and Christian service." Stott, 291 [SLIDE]
 3. Piper's analogy of the solar system with Jesus Christ as the sun at the center of our lives, and everything else in our lives as the planets in their proper orbits around that sun. [SLIDE]

e. Paul's observations of the Athenians (22-23)

- i. They were very religious
 1. "They say that Athens is most pious towards the gods" Sophocles
 2. "The most pious of the Greeks" Josephus
 3. "The Athenians venerate the gods more than others" Pausanias
- ii. The objects of their worship
 1. We ALL worship something or someone - it's simply the way we're made.
- iii. They even included an altar "To the unknown god"
 1. There may have been more than one of these, due to erosion and refitting.
- iv. Paul uses this unknown god's altar as his point of contact with the Athenians.
- v. Compare with D. A. Carson's approach to college evangelization, and the cultural shift from being able to start with Jesus, since people knew who he is, to needing to start with God and creation, because people no longer know who Jesus is. We are moving from a Christianized society to a pagan society.
 1. What is a pagan?
 - a. "Paganism (from classical Latin *pāgānus* "rural, rustic," later "civilian") is a term first used in the fourth century by early Christians for people in the Roman Empire who practiced polytheism....Alternate terms in Christian texts for the same group were *hellene*, *gentile*, and *heathen*.

Ritual sacrifice was an integral part of ancient Graeco-Roman religion and was regarded as an indication of whether a person was pagan or Christian.”

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paganism>)

- vi. Imagine the irony of the situation, and perhaps the Athenians thoughts at this point:
 - 1. This wandering Jew, “this babbler,” is accusing us, the most learned city in the world, of ignorance, and thinks he can instruct us?
 - 2. But they acknowledged their ignorance by dedicating an altar to an unknown god.
- vii. Perhaps this is a point of commonality with our world today. We are a generation with more information (and knowledge?) available to us now than ever before in human history, and yet we can still be so ignorant of what is truly true, knowing so much about our world and attributing it to chance rather than the Creator. Highly educated and blatantly ignorant, all wrapped up into one!
 - 1. For example, consider this quote from *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert:
 - a. “The reason this book is being written by a hairy biped, rather than a scaly one, has more to do with dinosaurian misfortune than with any particular mammalian virtue.” (91)
[SLIDE]
 - b. “typical pseudo scientific apocalyptic environmental hysteria” Amazon.com review
- f. God as creator and sustainer of all life, and Lord over all (24-25)
 - i. **Psalm 100:3** [SLIDE]
 - ii. **Psalm 50:9-12** [SLIDE]
 - iii. God as Lord
 - 1. Master
 - 2. Ruler
 - 3. Owner
 - 4. No one above him
 - 5. None greater
 - 6. Supremacy
 - iv. God does not need us, or anything from us. It is we who are entirely dependent upon him.
- g. Humankind’s common ancestry and God’s sovereignty (26-27)

- i. The Athenians apparently believed that they were autochthonous—that they had sprung up from the soil of their native Attica. The Athenians were the only Greeks on the European mainland who had no tradition of their ancestors' coming into Greece. Everyone else was considered a barbarian, and inferior to the Greeks. (Bruce, 337)
 - ii. Paul corrects their wayward thinking, telling them that all humans come from one man originally created by God.
 - 1. How does racism fit into this truth? It doesn't.
 - iii. God's sovereignty
 - 1. He has determined beforehand (before time began?) the time periods and geographical boundaries of every single nation that has been and ever will be.
 - a. Ponder the implications of Paul's statement.
 - b. Theologians and God's two (at least) wills:
 - i. his secret or hidden will
 - ii. his revealed will
 - 2. **Deuteronomy 32:8 [SLIDE]**
 - iv. Man's responsibility
 - 1. **Romans 1:19-20 [SLIDE]**
- h. God is the omnipresent creator and sustainer, and not an idol made of stone by human hands **(27-29)**
- i. Both quotes originally referred to Zeus. **[SLIDES]**
 - 1. The first quote from Epimenides is a response to the Cretans' claim that the tomb of Zeus was on the island of Crete.
 - ii. Compare with
 - 1. **Acts 14:16-17 [SLIDE]**
 - 2. **Romans 11:36 [SLIDE]**
 - 3. "God, not merely the creation, is the environment in which we exist." Peterson, 499 **[SLIDE]**
 - iii. So if we are God's offspring in the sense that he created us, and if we are living, thinking beings, then how could God be simply an image made of gold, silver, or stone? He isn't. Paul is arguing from the lesser (us) to the greater (God) to make his point.
- i. God's call to repentance, and the coming judgment **(30-31)**
- i. "The times of ignorance God overlooked"
 - 1. Were those times excusable?
 - ii. "but now he commands all people everywhere to repent"
 - 1. What changed? The coming of Jesus Christ into the world!

- iii. Why the command to repent?
 - 1. Because there is a day of final unavoidable judgment coming for every person who ever existed.
 - a. That day has already been determined by God. Ponder this!
 - 2. And because the judge has been appointed - Jesus himself.
 - iv. What's the proof?
 - 1. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead.
 - v. Anything missing?
 - 1. The Law?
 - a. God will judge the world in righteousness.
 - 2. The cross?
 - a. Paul did say that Jesus was raised from the dead, but perhaps, or surely, he explained the significance of the cross to those who believed.
- j. The response to his message **(32-24)**
- i. At this point, some mocked - why?
 - 1. "Once a man dies and the earth drinks his blood, there is no resurrection." Aeschylus, *Eumenides*
 - 2. The Greeks did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.
 - 3. Not much different than people today.
 - ii. Others said they'd like to hear more.
 - 1. Perhaps these wished that what Paul said was true?
 - iii. Some believed, and a church was planted in Athens.

The take-away for us

Resources

1. *The Acts of the Apostles*, F. F. Bruce, 1990
2. *The Book of the Acts*, F. F. Bruce, 1988
3. *The Acts of the Apostles*, David G. Peterson
4. *The Message of Acts*, John Stott
5. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ben Witherington III
6. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, F. F. Bruce