

Faith and Philosophy

We are told certain things don't mix. You might hear, *"Science and philosophy have no place in religion."* I disagree, completely. With regard to science, nothing in all the sciences conflicts with Scripture. In fact, the more God enlightens man with broader scientific knowledge, more and more claims in the Bible continue to be validated. Philosophy differs from science in that philosophy is the pursuit of reason, logic. It seeks to understand by knowing both the cause and the value of something. The Bible doesn't simply provide facts about what God and the universe are, or what men and women are, it provides reasons for why we are here, our value, and the wisdom to understand and engage God and one another in the most purposeful and significant ways. In short, science and philosophy harmonize perfectly with Christianity and God's Word.

The Apostle Paul understood how to engage differing audiences using the Bible from multiple angles. When addressing Jews, Paul would expound the Scriptures to show that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. When addressing the Greek philosophers, Paul would reason through the relationship that man and God have with one another. This essay will focus on Paul's interactions with both Jews and Greek philosophers in the ancient city of Athens.

Let's unpack Acts 17:16-21, going one verse at a time. Verse 16, ***"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols."*** Provoked here means, to make sharp, angered, or aroused. Paul had a holy indignation caused by amount of idolatry the city had long held onto. Verse 17, ***"So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present."*** When in the synagogues, which were the Jewish houses of worship, Paul would expound from the Scriptures how Jesus is the Messiah. In the synagogues there were some ***"God-fearing Gentiles,"*** Gentiles, who were proselytes to the Jewish religion, and worshipped the god of Israel with the Jews, in their synagogues, but knew nothing of Jesus Christ. Beyond people in the synagogues, Paul reasoned with those ***"in the market place every day,"*** which would have been random people of various faiths and backgrounds. So, Paul ministered using a different approach depending on the person.

Verse 18, ***"And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, 'What would this idle babbler wish to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,' because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."*** Epicurean philosophers were followers of Epicurus, a notable philosopher who died in Athens in 270 B.C. Epicurean taught that life's purpose was happiness and tranquility; achieved through "Aponia": the absence of pain. Whatever troubles your body and mind, detach from it, and seclude from worldly temptations. Epicurean philosophers believed in gods, so long as worship brought happiness and peace. These followers held no concern for an afterlife, believing that at death, one's soul simply sleeps undisturbed. Stoic philosophers were those who held to a philosophy where man seeks harmony by having a lack of emotion. Different from Epicureans, whose greatest desire is pleasure and peace, Stoics seek no emotional desires at all. This was supposedly achieved by aligning oneself with nature. A "Stoic Sage" is one who has achieved a perfect alignment with nature and therefore has no passions or emotions, but is perpetually calm. You can see by the initial opinions of these "thinkers", how some of them held little regard for what Paul had to say, calling him a ***"idle babbler"***. Sometimes, people who consider themselves academic, or deep-thinkers, aren't open-minded to ideas outside of their own. This is an example of how the wisdom of the world is shamed by the truth of the gospel; ***"For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, 'He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS,'"*** 1 Corinthians 3:19, and James 3:15, ***"This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic."*** Fortunately, the people here at Athens were open to hearing from Paul.

Verses 19-21, ***"And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 'For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.' (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)"*** It's important to note that the Greeks were pantheistic: worshipped many gods. In doing such, they worshipped on high places, like hill tops, where they built temples; believing that higher elevations

somehow esteemed their gods all the more. Here, the Areopagus was the hill-top temple of Ares: god of war. Ares is represented by the red planet Mars. This meeting was on a hilltop dedicated to Mars, so it's known as Mars Hill. The Athenians held an open-air counsel, known as the court of justice, at the Areopagus. Paul had been preaching a **"new teaching,"** which was the divinity of Jesus, and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. New messages always stirred the Greeks, as Greek philosophy contended that the older something is, the greater its value and truth. What philosophers fail to realize, is that the plan of salvation has never changed; it's the same message from Adam until today, which is that one is saved through faith alone in the one true God! The Apostle John, more than any other New Testament author, uses this truth often by regularly stating, **"in the beginning"** to highlight that no truth is older, and that nothing precedes salvation through faith alone. In the gospel of John, and his letter First John, the apostle uses the phrase fifteen times.

Verses 22-23, **"So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 'For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.** Notice Paul's examination of what they worship. Paul is laying out evidence. Paul is about to use philosophy to expound on a mysterious reality, which was their worship of an unnamed God that they believe to exist, but yet don't have any relationship with this particular deity. Why would Greeks even bother to worship a god that they can't identify? Keep in mind that Athenians believed they had a monopoly on wisdom, so, they believed this **"UNKNOWN GOD"** wasn't unknown because of *their* lack of understanding, but because the unknown god has chosen not to reveal himself to them. The inscription **"UNKNOWN GOD"** likely meant, *"To a god whose honor it is to keep himself unknown."*

The **"UNKNOWN GOD"** represents the god of the Jews, who the Greeks had little to no knowledge of. The Athenians called this god, *"The uncertain deity of Moses"*, likely from Isaiah 45:15, **"Truly, You are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Savior!"** Athenians, being more religious and superstitious than most Greeks, believed in pacifying the gods, so as to not anger them. So, to avoid overlooking one, it's better to build an altar to this unknown god as well. However, this only proves to highlight their religion as worthless; worship for worships sake, devoid of relationship and meaning. Paul finds value in understanding their worship, so as to reason with them.

Verses 24-25, **"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things."** The Greeks thought it served their gods to build them a temple to house them, and to give offerings to their gods, believing it built each gods wealth and significance. Paul uses philosophy to reason with them; God doesn't abide within the things He made. Since God created the universe, He exists outside the universe, not finding refuge within it. God is unaffected by His creation. In the same way, a person who makes a computer does not exist within the computer, and can exist just fine without one. Paul exposes the fact that there's no value in building a house for a spiritual immaterial being. Likewise, there's no value in giving a material offering to an immaterial God. Afterall, God made the universe and everything in it, so presenting God with something He Himself already made is silly! The Greeks believed they could make their gods rich.

Verse 26, **"And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation."** Every nation came from one individual man, Adam. Paul shows that he isn't biased, but sees all mankind as his kin. **"Appointed times and boundaries,"** shows that Paul is arguing God's supreme wisdom in ordering all of time and space. This truth opposed the Stoics view of fate, and the Epicurean's view of chance. Paul reasons that the nations, which have flourished during different time periods, and in different regions geographically, were all orchestrated by God's sovereign will. God even appoints the boundaries these nations have; mountains and seas, which govern their reach.

Verse 27, **"That they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us."** The concept of "groping" for God, and finding Him by this manner of searching, reveals that God is ready to be found. He's not doing anything to be **"UNKNOWN."** In fact, God is found by even the simplest of means; groping, which is the lowest form of searching; using touch to find one's way, like a blind man who would grope for anything he's looking for. Athenians suggest God is far off and unable to be known. Paul reveals their flawed wisdom,

and shows they haven't even employed the easiest means to discover God. Instead, they've focused on mythology and naturalistic views. Paul reasons that we find and know God from just simply contemplating the natural world around us.

Verses 28-29, ***"For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 'Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.'"*** Who are the children of God? And in what sense are people God's children? Paul reiterates that all are God's children, not in a spiritual sense, as are Christians, but that all mankind is made by God. On this fact, he shows a contrast between God's divine nature and their hand-formed images of Him. God honors mankind by making us superior to all other created things; made in His image, but they dishonor God by making an image of Him after our bodies. The Godhead, the one true God and Creator of the universe, is invisible, immaterial, and incomprehensible; therefore, it's unjust to portray Him with the image of something He created. It's silly to think that something made of gold or silver can provide a representation of God.

Verses 30-31, ***"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."*** When Paul states that God has ***"overlooked the times of ignorance,"*** this means that God hated their choices, but chose not to destroy them. He gave them no special revelation to direct them, but left them to their stupidity and ignorance. But, ***"God is now declaring"*** that Paul now comes a special revelation from God, declares the greatest special revelation of God – Jesus! Jesus is the ***"Man"*** who ***"will judge the world in righteousness."*** Additionally, ***"Through a Man,"*** means that from one man, Adam, came all mankind, and through one Man, Jesus, comes salvation. The statement ***"proof to all men,"*** doesn't mean that every man on earth is aware of Jesus and His resurrection, but that every man will know at Judgement, that Jesus was fit to be the Judge on that great day, proved so by God ***"raising Him from the dead."***

Applications

Our purpose in this life isn't to be happy, tranquil, and care free, like the Athenians believed. Satan wants you to pursue these things, not God. Don't expect that a Christian's life will offer these things; these come in the afterlife. However, a Christian's life, on this side of heaven, does provide satisfaction, significance, and purpose.

Paul's mission, and ours, is to engage people where they're at, and point them to Jesus. Paul examined people's beliefs and used reason to discern truth from untruth. Christians ought to be doing the same.

God isn't served by human hands or enriched by earthly treasures. Our offering is to entrusting ourselves to Him so as to be used by Him daily. Are you available to be used by God today?

Are you seeking to discover more of God? Perhaps you've gotten tired and lazy. I'd encourage you to start groping. God's ready to be discovered by anyone who will seek Him. Discover His goodness!