

Woodland Baptist Church

August 15, 2012 - Wednesday Night in the Word

Acts 17:22-34 You Are Very Religious - Paul's Sermon to the Athenian Areopagus

1) MODERN DAY BABBLERS

- a) Old - Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud.
- b) New - Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Chris Hitchens
- i) **1 Corinthians 1:26-31**- 26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

2) INTRODUCTION

- a) If Luke's Pisidian Antioch account portrays Paul as Rabbi par excellence, his Athens account portrays Paul as the great Greek orator. This is the sole instance in Acts where Paul's Hellenistic education as a Tarsus native shines through. [Ger]
- b) **1 Corinthians 9:20-21** -19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.
- i) In Athen, Paul must remove his figurative prayer shawl and don his philosopher's robe. [Ger]

3) **Verses 22-34** Christians must find an ENTRY point to ENGAGE false belief

- a) **22** So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.
- i) **I perceive that in every way you are very religious** - [deisidaimonesteros] - (from deidō, "to dread" and daimōn, "a deity") – properly, religious (superstitious) fear, driven by a confused concept of God – producing "sincere" but very misdirected religion. Indeed, this is the mark of heathenism; can also mean superstition.
- (1) A Jew presuming to teach ignorant Athenians!
(2) If there had been any Jews present on the Areopagus they would have appreciated Paul’s subtle double entendre, for the same word that is translated “religious” is understood by the Jews as meaning, “fear of demonic.” [Ger]
- ii) **‘To an unknown god’** - [agnostos theos] - unknown god - very interesting that they admitted their ignorance of the divine nature...Paul would now take this opportunity to let them know who he really was.
- (1) Paul affirms that the Athenians had been correct in this practice of making an idol to “an unknown god”...there indeed was a God of whom they had been ignorant who demanded their worship. [Ger]
- b) **What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...**
- i) **Romans 1:19-22** - 18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became

fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

- ii) Gal 4:8-9 - Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?
- iii) Ephesians 4:18 - Ephesians 4:18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.
- iv)
- v)

- (1) The tone of the sermon at the Areopagus was different than Romans, Paul was more reserved, the letter to Rome was directed to Christians, the sermon in Athens was to unconverted pagans.
- (2) As the sermon at Pisidia Antioch 13:16-41 served as a model sermon to a synagogue, this sermon served as a model to pagan intellectuals.

4) **Verses 24-28** God is Creator, SUSTAINER, Ruler and DWELLS closely to us

- i) **Recall what happened in Lystra, when Paul and Barnabas preached to the pagans - Acts 13:15-17 - 15 “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. 16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”**
- b) **24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”**

- i) God is the Creator of the Universe - 24 Does not live in temples made by hand - [Stephen's murder, Nicodemus]
- (a) Paul's critique 'seems to go out of its way to find common ground with philosophers and poets', but his presuppositions are 'not drawn from Platonism or Stoicism but unambiguously from the OT'. [Bruce]
- (2) This view is very different from either the *Epicurean* emphasis on a chance combination of atoms or the virtual *pantheism* of the Stoics. Paul displays God as the **personal Creator** of everything that exists and the **personal Lord** of everything he has made. It is absurd then, therefore, to suppose that he who made and supervises everything lives in shrines which human beings have built. [Stott]
- (a) **1 Kings 8:27** - 27 "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!
- (b) **Acts 7:44-53** -44 "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. 45 Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for him. 48 Yet the Most High **does not dwell in houses made by hands**, as the prophet says[Isaiah 66:1-2], 49 "'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?' 51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."
- (c) **The charges against Stephen were as follows** - "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."
- ii) God is the Sustainer of Life - 25 Gives to all mankind life and breath and everything...

(1) Any attempt to tame or domesticate God, to reduce him to the level of a household pet dependent on us for food and shelter, is again a ridiculous reversal of roles. We depend on God, he does not depend on us. [Stott]

iii) God is the Ruler of all the nations - **26 Made from one man (Adam) every nation of mankind 26 Determined allotted periods and boundaries or dwelling places... 27 Should seek God and feel their way toward him and find him [View of Humanity]**

(1) The Athenians, alone among the Greeks in having no history of their ancestral immigration to Athens from elsewhere, claimed to be unique among all peoples, having sprung up from the soil of their region. [Ger]

(2) This removed all imagined justification for the belief that Greeks were innately superior to barbarians, as it removes all justification for comparable beliefs today. Neither in nature nor in grace, neither in the old creation nor in the new, is there any room for ideas of racial superiority. [F.F. Bruce]

(3) **Period and Boundaries...dwelling places**

(a) If 'seasons' is read, the allusion will be to Genesis 1:14, but if appointed times in history, then a text like Daniel 2:36–45 will provide the theological background. The boundaries of their lands seems to be a reference to the various areas in which the races live (cf. Dt. 32:8), and so it could be argued that the preceding expression refers to the periods in history when those regions are dominated by particular races. Thus, there is a collective responsibility and privilege shared by humanity as a whole in God's creation. Yet God has also ordained special times and places for nations within that overarching purpose. the two truths must be held in tension when applying biblical teaching to situations in our world today. However, Paul's argument also has religious implications. Different gods were associated with different races and different lands. 'If God is working to unite all peoples in Christ, crossing national boundaries, then God is also working against polytheism.' [Witherington]

(b) **Deuteronomy 32:8** -When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

(4) The determination of man's home (earth) preceded his creation, in the Divine plan. [Moulton]

iv) What was God's purpose in arranging time and place so providentially for men and women's well being?

(1) Should seek God and Feel their way toward him - [psélaphaó] - I feel, touch, handle, grope for; 5584 [5584 (psēlapháō) comes from a root meaning, "to rub, wipe"; hence, to feel on the surface (see Gen 27:12,21,22 in the LXX).] [**biblos**]

(a) **1 John 1:1-3** - That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us...

v) **27 He is actually not far from each one of us** - Paul illustrates this point by quoting from two Greek poets:

(a) Paul is describing a potential that was not fulfilled in the Athenian situation. There was plenty of reaching out for God in the form of popular religion and philosophical reflection, but the result was a proliferation of idolatry and self-confessed ignorance of the true God (vv. 16, 22–23). Nevertheless, God's purpose for humanity remains, despite the blinding and corrupting effects of sin. The possibility of seeking after God and finding him is based on the fact that God 'is not far from any one of us'. [Peterson, Pillar NT]

(2) Epimenides the Cretan (600 B.C.) - "They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one - the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idel bellies! - But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever, **for in thee we live and move and have our being.**"

(3) Paul's fellow Cilician, Aratus (born 310 B.C.) - [*Phainomena*] Some of your own poets have said, "Let us being with Zeus. Never O men, let us leaven him unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus, and all the market-places of human beings. The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus, **for we are truly his offspring.**"

vi) **Romans 10:6-9** - 6 But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)

7 “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? **“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”** (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

- (1) In these quotes, Zeus is considered not as the ruler of the traditional pantheon of Greek mythology but as the supreme being of Greek and especially Stoic, philosophy. What are we to make of Paul’s use of these poems? Is he affirming Zeus as a god? NO!
 - (2) He is showing them that even in their own pagan poetry, they reveal there is an element that is seeking for the Divine, just in the wrong Divine. Even in their contexts the words quoted could be taken as pointing to some recognition of the true nature of God. [Bruce]
 - (3) His precedent gives us warrant to do the same, and indicates that glimmerings of truth, insights from general revelation, may be found in non-Christian authors. [Stott]
- c) These are powerful arguments. All idolatry whether ancient or modern, primitive or sophisticated, is inexcusable, whether the images are metal or mental, material objects of worship or unworthy concepts in the mind. For idolatry is the attempt either to localize God, confining him within limits we impose, whereas he is the Creator of the universe; or to domesticate God, making him dependent on us, taming and taping him, whereas he is the Sustainer of human life; or to alienate God, blaming him for his distance and his silence, whereas he is the Ruler of nations, and not far away from us; or to dethrone God, demoting him to some image of our own contrivance or craft, whereas he is our Father from whom we derive our being. In brief all idolatry tries to minimize the gulf between the Creator and his creatures, in order to bring him under our control. More than that, it actually reverses the respective positions of God and us, so that instead of our humbly acknowledging that God has created and rules us, we presume to imagine that we can create and rule God. [Stott, commentary on Acts, pg 287]

5) Verses 29-31 Judgment demands **CORRECT** knowledge and **REPENTANCE**

- i) Paul transitioned to humanity’s responsibility to God. Having presented basic monotheism, Paul added the thrust of Moses’ first two commandments, to have no other gods and to create no engraved images. [Ger]

b) **29** Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** 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 by raising him from the dead."

i) **29** Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

(1) if we are God's offspring, then we should know that God cannot be composed of gold, silver or stone - he must be of spirit or of flesh of some sort - even if we try to make an artful representation of God, we run the risk of worshiping that image.

(2) If we are personal beings, able to relate to one another with love and trust, God our creator cannot be anything less. How can the impersonal give birth to the personal? [Peterson, Pillar NT]

(3)

ii) What are times of ignorance?

(1) **Acts 13:16-17** - 16 In past generations **he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways**. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

(2) **Romans 3:23-25** - 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in **his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins**. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

(a) The coming of Christ marks a fresh start in God's dealings with the human race. In the present place God's overlooking 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. If ignorance of the divine nature was culpable before, it is inexcusable now...

iii) Now he commands repentance from everyone - he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man he has appointed

- (1) 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 -5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— 6 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.
- (2) Greek thought had no room for such an eschatological judgment as the biblical revelation announces. [Bruce]

iv) Given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

6) Verses 32-34 Three reactions: MOCKERY, CURIOSITY, and CONVERSION

- a) **32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.**
- i) Resurrection would have collided with the Greek worldview completely. The Epicureans would have agreed with the immortality of the soul, but would have never believed the resurrection of the entire body.
- (1) Athene - "once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection."
- ii) Dionysius the Areopagite - a primary leader in the Areopagus began to follow Paul and accepted Christ.
- iii) Damaris - a woman that we know nothing about other than her mention in this passage.
- iv) Others - no information, possibly listed in Romans 16?

7) CLOSE

