

Paul vs. The Philosophers  
Acts 17: 16-34  
October 5, 2008  
Rev. Curtis J. Young

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If you want to see how great the impact Athens has on our own culture, take the Metro downtown.

We are a half hour away from buildings inspired by the ruins of the acropolis and remains of the Parthenon -- great columns of marble and stone, the exquisite frescoes, and temples as memorials.

It is not just the architecture of Athens but its philosophies that continue to shape us as well. There are no new ideas, only rediscovered ones.

So when we come to Paul's speech to the city's leaders, there is much for us to hear, and include as essential to our own Christian witness.

Just over three centuries before Paul walked the streets of Athens, a man named Diogenes roamed the streets with a lantern in broad daylight. Asked what he was doing, he replied, "I am a looking for an honest man." When Alexander the Great came to see him, Diogenes chided him, "Get back. You're standing in my light."

Diogenes left behind no school of philosophy such as Epicurus did with the Epicureans or Xeno did with the Stoics. Rather he left behind an outlook of deep suspicion directed toward people, institutions, the gods, a studied attitude of irreverence and mockery toward all ideas.

Having once referred to himself as the dog no one wants to pet, the dog became his symbol, the term for dog was applied to those who shared his outlook: the cynic. By the first century much of Athens was deeply cynical.

When Luke tells us people there "spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas," (21) he was speaking to the prevailing cynicism. Ideas were fodder for ridicule and mockery until the next idea came along.

You have an idea? We can tear it apart until there is nothing left, because there was nothing to it in the first place. There is nothing to anything and nothing to life except to be bored.

This is the air we breathe. As Robert Wright wrote in The Moral Animal, "What is to be avoided at all costs in the postmodern age is earnestness, which betrays an embarrassing naïveté."

I want to say a word, then about the two schools of philosophy Luke does mention in verse 18.

The stoics were especially influenced by cynicism. (18). The stoics believed in fate, that life is largely out of any human control or influence. The forces of nature are the divine power that exists. Nothing can be done about them.

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What a man can control is himself. The good man is the man who practices self-reliance, honor and duty. The only faith that matters is faith in oneself. Truth is beside the point.

The Epicureans believed the gods are far too removed to have any interest in human affairs. Everything in the world is composed of small units called atoms, and these atoms moving randomly and chaotically determine everything that happens. Everything is the result of chance. Man's chief end is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

Stoicism produced many heroes. Epicurean produced many wasted lives. Underlying both was deep disillusionment and cynicism. Idolatry fed those impulses and many more.

Luke tells us that Paul was "greatly distressed" by the idols he saw. The city was full of them, literally under idols. The Roman satirist Xenophon had quipped that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.

Paul was jealous for God's honor and people's hearts. He saw the idols, or forces behind them, as rivals. So he engaged the cynics. At first they called him a babblers, literally a 'seed picker,' a man who has picked up some weird ideas along the way, about some Jesus and some resurrection. Eventually, the leaders invited him to speak before the Supreme Council, if for no other reason, to break the boredom.

Notice with me what Paul did, and how he challenged their cynicism.

In verse 24, he proclaimed God the creator; "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands." God is the personal creator and personal Lord. He is neither be confined to a temple close by or heaven far off. He cannot be controlled. He is not disengaged, either.

With these words Paul denied that chance, the well spring of Epicureanism, exists. He denied that our origin is the result of chaos, of atoms in random motion. His words speak to us. We have imported into our understanding of the world the term atom to describe particles though we now know they are by no means irreducibly small. What's more we have imported the concepts of chance and chaos, so we are told, by chance life exists and man evolved.

In fact, terms like chance and chaos are a statement about ourselves, about the limits of our understanding. To say a process is random is to say we do not know enough to predict what is going to happen next. It does not mean God cannot predict or that God did not determine the outcome.

To say that something happens by chance is to say we do not know the cause, or can't keep track of the multitudes of causes and effects that lead to what the thing we observe. It most certainly does not mean that what we see has no purpose, or does not serve God's purpose.

The debate between creationists and evolutionists often centers on how to interpret evidence. Does this skull fragment really prove the missing link man and ape? Is that method of dating really reliable? The more profound issue is left unaddressed, the same philosophical assumptions that Paul spoke to in Athens.

Chaos, randomness, chance – Do such terms describe reality or the limits of our knowledge? If our starting point is, "I think, therefore, I am," we should expect to bump up against limits constantly. But if

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our starting point is, “God creates, therefore I am, and all things are,” a whole new world of understanding opens up to us, and faith.

In verse 25, Paul proclaims God to be the sustainer: “And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”

The cynic looked at temples of Athens and said, “If it weren’t for us, the gods would have no place to live. If it weren’t for our adoration, the gods would feel unappreciated. They need us.”

It’s a very small cynical step to take from saying the gods need us to saying, “I can see through that. The gods exist because of us.” “And I can see through that. We are the ones who create gods.” “I see through that. We create gods because we need them.” “I can see through that. Worshipers are human weaklings.”

In fact idolatry is like that. But by his statement, Paul cut through the cynicism to insist the existence of idols does not disprove the existence of God. The dependence of idols on their makers (us) actually illustrates our dependence on God. Whatever is created is dependent on the one who created it. God created us. All we need comes from him, even life itself.

In verse 26, Paul declares God to be our ruler. “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”

God not only creates and sustains us, but our own history, even dates and locations are under his control - where people live, and for how long.

There is great debate within the church over whether God has determined all things, if not in the creation, then especially in regard to our own lives and the history of nations. But Paul’s words should leave us in no doubt. The principle I enunciated in regard to the creation applies here.

If we cannot know what the map of the world will look like in one hundred years, or the names that will be written inside the boundaries of the nations, that does mean God does not know. Or that he has not already determined it. The limits of our influence and our knowledge are not limits to God.

The scriptures speak of God’s hidden counsels, plans to fulfill his purposes which he has not revealed to us. But we do know they encompass the entire creation, every atom in the universe and every person on earth. We know that because everything and everyone who has been created has been created for his glory.

What’s more the distance we so often feel from God is not the result of God being far from us, but of our being far from him, of our removing ourselves from him. Paul uses the language of Homer to describe Cyclops groping to find Odysseus after a stake had been driven into the giant’s eye. We grope for him because of the blindness of sin and the log it is in our eyes.

Finally, in verses 30-31, Paul declares God to be our judge: In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world

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with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Note the term man. Paul was not referring to a god who assumes human form only to die and rise because of course he was a god. He was referring to one who was fully human, who died, and then rose never to die again. Read the reactions of the Greeks. They knew Paul was declaring something strange (18) and new (19).

Flesh and blood rising in glory, yet still remaining flesh and blood forever, was vulgar to the Greek mind. So many mocked him.

Yet Paul insists that this has not only happened but that the knowledge of it leaves men without excuse. It sweeps away the veil of ignorance and distortion concerning God’s power over creation; concerning God’s reign in history; concerning his compassion and love for men; concerning a sure purpose for this world.

Yet we haven’t even heard the name of Jesus in Paul’s sermon, or the Cross, or the necessity of faith in him. Why would Paul preach this way?

One of Paul’s concerns may well have been, and one of our concerns should be, that many reject our gospel not because they perceive it to be false but because they perceive it to be trivial, to make little difference in how one lives or what one can know.

If we preach Jesus without the doctrine of the greatness of God, we trivialize Christ; or the cross without creation; or faith without repentance; or salvation without judgment. Jesus appears as no more than another idol in a city that is full of idols.

When people see that what is at involved in turning to Christ is accepting an entirely different worldview that takes into account all of time, that makes sense of human experience, that explains our best aspirations and worst tendencies, that provides real hope rather than shallow optimism, Christ is most clearly seen as Lord and Savior.

What’s more they the extent of what was unknown to them concerning God, how dependent they have been all along and their need to turn and seek him. Only they are not left to grope in darkness. They have been given a light by which to draw near to him. Not that light by which we cynically see through the superficiality and hypocrisy of this world, but the light is Christ himself, by whom we come face to face with God.