

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

Continuing the Second Missionary Trip of Paul and The Famous Mars Hill Sermon Chapter Seventeen

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Acts 17:1 “Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

Acts 17:2 And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

Acts 17:3 explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."

Acts 17:4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.”

Their continued travel now brought them to a town that had a synagogue so that Paul was able to begin his witnessing about Jesus in the way that was his preference. The ordinary procedure for a synagogue meeting was for a visiting, respected person to be invited to read the Scripture and certainly Paul had an outstanding reputation as a Jewish scholar. He was then probably invited to read the Word to the people and to expound upon the Word. These people would have been familiar with the Old Testament but would have probably known nothing about the Jesus Whom the Word prophesied. With his background, Paul was ideally suited to explain how the Old Testament prophets told of the coming of the Messiah and how Jesus fulfilled those prophesies. Paul's revelation of Jesus as the Messiah certainly would have been shocking to the participants! But God was working in the hearts of some of these people as evidenced by him being received well enough so that he was allowed to continue his preaching for three weeks. His approach was the same as what all of us should follow in that we reason with people about Jesus Christ not from our own wisdom but from the Word of God. As I have said many times, “I am not interested in my opinion, but the opinion of God is what is crucial for our existence”. We know that without God first intervening nobody would be persuaded concerning the truth of the message about Jesus Christ. But in this case God did intervene in the minds of some of these Jews and they were persuaded that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and they actually joined Paul and Silas. Also becoming members of the family of God were some Gentiles who had become God-fearers and some unknown number of women who were leaders in the community.

Acts 17:5 “But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people.

Acts 17:6 And when they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also;

Acts 17:7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. "

Acts 17:8 And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things.

Acts 17:9 And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.”

Satan again rose up some opposition to this movement of God as he activated a mob of Jews who did not believe the truth. Luke told the story properly in that the Jews were jealous, which was the problem with them throughout the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles. They could see their hold on the people being diminished as the people were believing that Jesus was the Messiah and they were following the teaching of Paul.

There is an interesting aside here in that Luke used a Greek word “politarch” to refer to the city authorities. For many years liberal scholars used the use of this word as proof that Luke was a poor historian for this word had not been found in any other ancient literature. But further studies have found that there are some sixteen inscriptions bearing the use of this word in documents found only in Thessalonica and not throughout the Roman world. In fact there was found an arch above what had been a gate to the city that used this very word. Thus we see that Luke has been proven to be very observant and an excellent historian. Another place of our losing something in translation refers to the phrase “upset the world”, which is literally translated as having “turned the world upside down”. Of course sin turned the world upside down and now the Christians needed to turn the world upside down again so that I would be returned to its original order. The process of Christians turning the world upside down has been occurring continually since this time. Of course the world does not want to be turned upside down for then its system is shown to be wrong. Therefore the church has been the church militant for the last two thousand years and such will continue until Jesus comes again.

Jason was probably a Jew who had become a Christian as it was routine for people whose Hebrew name was Joshua to make the change to Jason or some other Greek name. Jason found out quickly that the way of Jesus involved persecution for when the mob could not find Paul they dragged him and some other Christians before the city leaders. The mob was unruly but the city authorities acted with reason probably because of the scant charges. The authorities only asked Jason for a pledge to help stop any unruly disturbances and they let him and the other Christians go home. We have Paul’s letters to the church at Thessalonica that give us some more details about events in this region of the world after Paul was involved in setting up the church there and simultaneous readings of this portion of Acts and Paul’s writings to the church are very beneficial.

Acts 17:10 “And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Acts 17:11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.

Acts 17:12 Many of them therefore believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.”

The new Christians protected Paul and Silas by sending them to Berea at night. As usual, Paul and Silas went to the Jewish synagogue to first teach. The people assembled at this synagogue attended to the teaching in a very intellectual manner rather than being immediately threatened by the teaching of the missionaries. I guess today we would say that the people were very broadminded and tolerant. These people did not react emotionally but carefully listened to the teaching and then compared the teachings to the written Word. This reaction is exactly the manner in which we should react to any teaching to which we are exposed. We should test the teaching with the Scripture before making any judgment concerning the teaching. In our case we have the 66 books of the Bible and any teaching should be consistent with God’s Word in its entirety. Of course just reasoning will not lead us to salvation. God must first act to give us faith so that we can then believe and we see here that many of these people did become children of God. *Rom 9:16 “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”*

God had mercy on many people here and the number of His children was growing rapidly.

Acts 17:13 “But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there likewise, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Acts 17:14 And then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there.

Acts 17:15 Now those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.”

But the Jews of Thessalonica were not satisfied to have just chased Paul and Silas out of their town. They followed Paul to Berea and again started sowing discord into the harmony of the Gospel message. The following of the Jews to the new place where Paul was teaching reminds me of the first missionary journey when Paul and Barnabas fled Iconium and the Jews followed him to Lystra and there they fired up the mob and had Paul stoned (Acts 14:15) and left for dead. There we saw that Luke reported that Paul just got up from this horrible stoning and went back into the city. However perhaps Paul does not want to have a repeat of that event! We see that the new Christians in Berea sent Paul to the sea but Silas and Timothy stayed in the city. The brethren then took Paul to Athens where Paul asked for Silas and Timothy to come join him and the brethren went back to their homes leaving Paul alone there to spend time in prayer and meditation.

The language is pretty firm in that the Christians sent Paul to the sea and then conducted him to Athens. We are left to our imagination and our insight into Paul's character to be tempted to add something to this discussion. It does seem to me that Paul was such a strong person both in body and spirit that he had to be taken out of Berea rather than being allowed to face more persecution that could have led to another stoning. Then he had to be further forced in a loving way by these new Christians to go all the way to Athens. It seems that God was making Paul retreat from another confrontation so that he could be led to another setting where his great mind could face another situation where his reasoning ability could be used in a more orderly environment. The situation in Berea had become too emotionally charged and not likely to respond to reason.

Acts 17:16 "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols.

Acts 17:17 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.

Acts 17:18 And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. And 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.

Acts 17:19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?"

Acts 17:20 "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean.""

Acts 17:21 (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)

God had indeed placed Paul in an area where people were willing to consider all possible gods and where Paul could now teach to them about the God that they did not know. This was truly a sophisticated area where people loved to hear of new teachings but were dedicated to no single philosophy. Athens was the native city of Socrates and Plato and was regarded as the leading city for the study of philosophy. Because of its status, Rome allowed the city to be a free city within the Roman Empire. Athens of this time reminds me of a university setting except today the learned people are not tolerant of the Christian philosophy. We know that Paul could not just sit and whittle as he waited for his comrades to join him. Paul had time to look around the city and he saw much evidence of this philosophical interest of the people and what he saw agitated his spirit. He saw much evidence of idol worship but no evidence of the worship of the only God. As usual he went first to the Jewish synagogue to begin his teachings but he also went into the market place to reason with anyone that "happened" to be present to hear him. Some of the local top philosophers of the city were also present and heard Paul teaching of some deity that was unknown to them. Although these people prided themselves on their knowledge and wisdom, Paul knew that they had no knowledge of God.

1Cor 10:20 "No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons."

The Epicureans had a philosophy that stated that pleasure was to be maximized and they were pure materialists. They were not the same as Hedonists who abandon themselves to pleasure but they were close. The Stoics were – and still are – the “grin and bare it” people. Regardless of the situation they would stick out their chin and show resolve against all situations. They have no sense of a divine presence but think that they can control their reactions to any situation and need no further help. The Stoics even commended suicide as an honorable means of escaping a life that had become unbearable! Since all these intellectuals thought of themselves as very knowledgeable and Paul was talking about something of which they knew nothing, they assumed that he was just babbling nonsense! The Greek word used indicates that both groups of these people looked upon Paul as one who picked up scraps of learning wherever he could much as a dog picks up crumbs from the floor near a table.

Actually Paul was talking about Jesus, who was unknown to these people at this time. But to their credit, rather than becoming emotionally charged against Paul they wanted to hear him talk more about this new teaching. Such a reaction would be uncommon today in a university setting for the “learned ones” are firmly decided that any teaching about Jesus Christ is the ranting of an unbalanced person.

1Cor 1:21 “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

1Cor 1:22 For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom;

1Cor 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness,

1Cor 1:24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Paul was taken to the Court of Areopagus that exercised power over matters of religion and morals. Its traditional power had been reduced during Roman rule but they still met to judge in such matters but not in a legal way that threatened some restitution. They mainly met to determine if someone’s religious or moral teaching was appropriate or not for their society.

Acts 17:22 And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.

Acts 17:23 "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.'

What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Acts 17:24 "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;

Acts 17:25 neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things;

Acts 17:26 and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation,

Acts 17:27 that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

Acts 17:28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ' For we also are His offspring.'

Acts 17:29 "Being then the offspring 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."

Many theologians have examined this presentation by Paul and some in a rather negative manner for it is very different from the sermons usually preached by Paul. But the audience is also very different than the one usually addressed by Paul. These people, although regarding themselves as very literate, knew nothing about the Old Testament writings so Paul had to take a different tack in his discussion. Paul was probably more intelligent and more widely read than anyone in his audience so he used information that was known by these people to try to help them to understand his position. He quotes Greek poets instead of Hebrew Scriptures. He begins with God as the creator of everything and ends with God as the judge of everything. He says that they seem to have statues to all possible gods and that they even had one to an unknown god. He then starts to enlighten them as to the identity of this unknown god who is indeed the only God. This God is the One who created everything and thus has no need of anything from the creatures that He created. Also His creatures cannot build a house for Him. Even the magnificent buildings built for false gods and the one in Jerusalem for God cannot be suitable for the One who created everything. We still today consider God as too small. We talk about His house as the "church" building in which we come to worship and then we seem to think that He stays there! God needs nothing from those He created!

Psa 50:9 "I shall take no young bull out of your house, Nor male goats out of your folds.

Psa 50:10 "For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills.

Psa 50:11 "I know every bird of the mountains, And everything that moves in the field is Mine.

Psa 50:12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all it contains."

God is the One who provides for our needs, rather than we providing anything that He might need. These people took great pride in being Athenians but Paul told them that God raised all people from the one that He created and He even provided the areas of the world in which all of these people would live. We can carry this statement forward to today in that there is no room for any racial pride nor is there any room for any claim to land other than that given to people by God. Verses 27 and 28 are somewhat similar to what Paul wrote in the first chapter of Romans but the audience is very different. He then quotes from two of their poets showing them that even their great thinkers realized the relationship between the supreme God and humanity. Thus Paul is showing them that even they have no excuse for not understanding that idols are of no real significance in comparison to God.

Acts 17:30 “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent,
Acts 17:31 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. ”
Acts 17:32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."
Acts 17:33 So Paul went out of their midst.
Acts 17:34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

Paul tells them that the coming of Jesus Christ marked a new time in the relationship of God to His creatures. There is a similarity to what Paul told these people and what he told the Romans:

Rom 3:21 “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,
Rom 3:22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;
Rom 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
Rom 3:24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;
Rom 3:25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;
Rom 3:26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

A day has been set for judgment and the person who will be the judge has now appeared and people are called to repent. Ignorance was excusable in the past but now that Jesus has come and done His work there is no excuse for anyone. The Greek philosophy had no teaching of such a judgment so this was indeed new information for these people. But the idea of a resurrection was outside of anything that they could believe. They followed the teachings of one of their gods, Apollo: “Once a man dies and the earth drinks his blood there is no resurrection”. This statement by Paul was judged ridiculous by many of them and was a “turn-off”, but some were kind and said that they were willing to hear him again on the topic. Luke does report that some of the people did have their minds opened by God and did join him. Two of the people are mentioned by name. But there is no mention of any baptizing and there is no record of a church formed here. Although Athens is in the Roman province of Achaia, Paul refers to the people of Corinth as the first-fruits from this area:

1Cor 16:15 “Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints),”

It is very interesting to note that the Athenians of today have made up for their ancestor's indifference by putting the text of Paul's talk on a bronze tablet at the foot of the ascent to the Areopagus and by naming a neighborhood street in Paul's honor! Too little, too late! This reminds me of the engraving on Boltzmann's tomb after it was determined that his statistical thermodynamic theory was indeed correct. Boltzmann committed suicide because he was so ridiculed about his theory.

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