

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 40, Chapters 17 and 18

We are in Acts chapter 17 and last week we ended our study with defining the belief systems of two groups that Paul encountered in Athens: the Epicureans and the Stoics. These two groups in no way passed for religions or held themselves up as religions; rather they were philosophies. In fact it would probably be fair to say that the goal of these two philosophical institutions was to be the replacement of religion.

It would be also accurate to say that Epicureanism and Stoicism were competitors to Judaism and therefore competitors to The Way. Essentially these human philosophies were alternative attempts to help pagans come to terms with life; something that Judaism (and true Biblical Hebrew-ism) had done successfully since the days of Moses. And when given a fair hearing there is no doubt that Judaism and Christianity have never been surpassed when it comes to creating a good, just, and workable system of law and society on earth because both of these ways of life are based on God's truth as opposed to mankind's inclinations.

Over the centuries the foundational premises of Epicureanism and Stoicism have hung around, just morphing into the latest cultural trends and political correctness, and being given new names. In the modern era the European Enlightenment of the 18th century adopted these same beliefs (just in new packaging) with the goal of eradicating religion that contained any sort of mysticism from European society. The main targets were Christianity and Judaism; it has largely succeeded. In contemporary 21st century times we call this same goal to abolish religion secularism; or we speak of it politically as Liberal Progressive ideals. So what Paul was confronting in Athens in the 1st century A.D., followers of the God of Israel are also confronting today. Thus (to a degree) just how Paul faced this great challenge is a good model for us in our time. And it is a rather simple model: don't ever back down. Tell the divine truth and let the chips fall where they may. Don't try to find a middle ground with those who choose secular philosophy over trust in God, because there isn't any; whatever you might see is at best a mirage. Any attempt to find common ground will do nothing but frustrate you, or at worst draw you towards their way of thinking and away from the Lord.

2Corinthians 6:14-18 CJB

14 Do not yoke yourselves together in a team with unbelievers. For how can righteousness and lawlessness be partners? What fellowship does light have with darkness?

15 What harmony can there be between the Messiah and B'liya'al? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

16 What agreement can there be between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God- as God said, "I will house myself in them,... and I will walk

among you. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

¹⁷ Therefore ADONAI says, "Go out from their midst; separate yourselves; don't even touch what is unclean. Then I myself will receive you.

¹⁸ In fact, I will be your Father, and you will be my sons and daughters.' says ADONAI-Tzva'ot."

We see the effects of both Judaism and Christianity's attempt to make peace with secular Liberal philosophy in the deteriorating health of both religions. In Judaism the most popular and fastest growing segment is called Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism is essentially Judaism with a lesser God, with a watered down Holy Book, and with fewer absolutes. Reform doctrines created by committee are their standard for living; they are designed to compromise with the ebb and flow of time and societal evolution. In Christianity we have a number of forms of it with the most recent being what is called the Emergent Church. While a belief in God remains, theirs is a God of tolerance who embraces all forms of religion and worship. The Judeo-Christian Holy Book, the Bible, while not quite obsolete, is mostly optional with all other of the world's religions' Holy Books seen as equally valid and worthy. Each person then is left to discern their own truth and own way of life, none having more merit or value than another.

So let's see how Paul handled this troubling situation he found in Athens that Luke says shook Paul to his core; and then see if we can derive from it how we ought to deal with a similar situation in our day both within and without the Church and synagogue.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 17:18 – end

It is interesting how the Epicureans and the Stoics accused Paul of trying to introduce foreign gods. Let's talk about that. These 2 philosophies had little regard for gods in the first place; they didn't worship any gods or goddesses. So why would they care if Paul was introducing foreign gods into Athens? First was because they were essentially trying to rid Athens of religion and the last thing they needed was some new gods that might become popular when introduced. Then as now, people loved new fashion and new trends. Second was because they were loyal to Greece. And even though they might not have any regard for these Greek gods, they didn't want some foreigner bringing their gods into Greek society. We find this same dynamic at play today among atheists, who are by definition secular and Liberal; they are the Stoics of our day. They don't believe that God or gods exist; yet you or I can't have a God or worship our God openly because that makes them feel threatened they say. How can they feel threatened by a God that is no more than a fantasy? I wonder if the Avengers make them feel threatened too, since they don't exist, either.

So just as Liberal secularists today take Christians and Jews to court to stop us from worshipping God publically (a god who doesn't exist they say), so did the Stoics and Epicureans take Paul to court to stop him from worshipping God (who doesn't exist they say). This court in Athens is well known in history; it is called the Court of Areopagus. This court was established centuries earlier to regulate religion and morals. It is interesting that it received its name from the formal designation for the hill of Ares (Ares was the Greek god of war) where

they met. Now in reality Paul was not brought to a judicial trial; these people loved exploring new ideas and of course denigrating the ones they thought unintelligent. So he was brought to the court to explain this religion of his to the religion experts whose job was to examine Paul's claims. Verse 21 comments that the city's grand intellectual inquisitors spent all their time exploring the latest intellectual fads. Today this occupation seems to be the province of our most admired Universities. Not much new under the Sun, is there?

But Paul was no pansy. Paul was an intellectual, too; highly educated and trained, used to grinding debate, and unafraid of confrontation. Jewish literature is filled to the brim with recorded arguments between the brilliant Jewish sages and rabbis, and the many gentile philosophers. So this sort of debate wasn't new to Paul. But he was also fluent in Greek, comfortable and familiar with the pagan world, and as we learn from his epistles, a fearless and able defender of the faith. Paul looked around and noticed that of the veritable garden of idols surrounding him at the hill of Ares stood one statue that was marked: "to an unknown god". So, says Paul, since you are already worshipping this god that you don't know anything about, let me introduce him to you. Those words could not have been for those who brought him before the court of Areopagus, because they were anything but religious. However those on the court, and the many Athenian spectators who spent so much of their time in idleness listening in on these empty debates that were the daytime Television of the 1st century in Athens, **were** religious and so Paul was addressing himself to them. Remember: Paul's goal isn't to rebut the philosophers as much as it is to have a stage to speak the truth of the Gospel to these pagans. And so Paul begins to explain just who God is.

At first nothing Paul is saying offends the audience. That is because he is but imparting new and interesting information. The first thing Paul does is to explain the sovereignty of God over all things and he does this by making the logical argument that since his God created all things including life itself, therefore He is superior and above all things; especially above manmade things. Therefore it would be inappropriate for Paul's God to live in Temples fashioned by human workmanship. And this God can't be coddled and served with the finest things of earth because he doesn't need humans for anything whatsoever: the God of Israel is the epitome of self-reliance.

Paul continues in verse 26 to explain that God began the human race from one individual whom He created, and so every human being who populates the many nations of the earth came from this first individual; the audience included (is the implication). Even more it was Paul's God who decided not only the boundaries of nations, but also the boundaries of the earth itself. Let me pause to make a point. I said a few minutes ago that Paul's defense of the Gospel to pagans and especially to pagan intellectuals is a good model for us. Notice how (to this point at least) the outspoken and often harsh Paul has (for him) been pretty subdued and gentle. He hasn't spoken down to these pagans about their ignorance of the truth. But also notice that he begins at the beginning and not one word of Holy Scripture is quoted. Why not? Pagans would have no idea about the source of those Biblical passages and even if they did know they wouldn't give those words any special credibility. So Paul has to debate them in a language and using terms that have meaning to them. That is exactly what we must do in our era for speaking God's truth to people who don't know who God is. And it will necessarily have to be culturally specific. Paul was speaking in a way that Athenians could understand

(whether they agreed with him or not was another matter). So we don't hear him use words like Messiah, redemption, blood of Christ, or Torah. First a context with a foundational base of knowledge has to be built.

So Paul says that God established humans and nations and gave them what they needed so that they would reach out to Him. That is, God would create evidence of Himself and thus humanity would recognize that something greater than themselves had to have created all that they see and so begin a search for that "something". It might surprise you to learn that several things Paul says to the Athenians are taken directly from a source that these Greeks would recognize. He quotes from Epimenides, then Aratus. In vs. 28 when Paul says "For in him we live and move and exist" it is actually taken from a quatrain written by Epimenides written for the purpose of criticizing the tomb of the god Zeus. Then when Paul says: "We are actually his children", this was originally a sentence composed by the Greek poet Cleanthes and then made popular by a book written by Aratus. And those words were meant to argue that God is willing to let humankind serve Him because He was many needs that need to be served. But Paul turns this meaning into something else entirely and argues that since all humans are God's children, then we shouldn't be making human looking idols since we are made in the image of God and God is not a human. So Paul is not so much building a case (yet) against the Greek gods as he is building a case of how God is to be properly characterized and worshipped. And if God is not a human, then it is improper to characterize him in various human forms (idols).

But now Paul raises his oratory up a notch in vs. 30 as he says that in times past God, in His great mercy, didn't act upon these wrong actions of gentile humanity because they were merely done in ignorance. However now God is commanding that the time has come to put away ignorance, and instead to gain knowledge of the true God, and to turn from sin. These are fighting words because Paul is telling these highly educated Athenians that their centuries-old god system is actually ignorance and it amounts to sin from which they must turn away.

Next Paul begins to make his case for Yeshua. He tells his audience that a day is coming when God will judge the world; and it will be through the agency of a certain man that this judging occurs. And that the identity of this man is evident and the proof of it is that God resurrected this man from the dead. These thoughts were foreign to any Greek way of thinking; the only nation that had a tradition of a coming day of worldwide judgment by a god was the Hebrew nation: the Jews.

Considering who he was dealing with, the very first thing that the Athenians had to learn was to turn away from idols. This was also the first thing that the pagan Thessalonians had to learn as we hear from Paul in 1st Thessalonians chapter 1.

1Thessalonians 1:7-9 CJB

⁷ Thus you became a pattern for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia;

⁸ for the Lord's message sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but everywhere your trust toward God became known. The result is that we don't need to

say anything;

⁹ since they themselves keep telling us about the welcome we received from you and how you turned to God from idols, to serve the true God, the one who is alive.....

We don't have to work too hard to imagine the growing upset among most of those listening to Paul. Paul was challenging the very core of Athenian religious life. But Luke says that what brought many of the crowd to the boiling point was this issue of resurrection. Others didn't dismiss it out of hand (intellectuals and academics have a habit, for the better or the worse, of never closing off any line of thought in case new information might surface) and they wanted to hear more on this matter from Paul. But an immortal soul was not unfamiliar within Greek thought (even though the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers would not accept such a thing). Even so, like with the Hebrew Sadducees, a bodily resurrection was seen as impossible.

Notice a couple of things before we move on to chapter 18. First, nothing is made of Paul's Jewishness. There seems to be no ethnic bigotry going on here. In fact Paul was given a pretty fair and respectful hearing. No doubt it was helpful that Paul spoke fluent Greek; but then again so did most Jews in that era (Jews who live in the Diaspora). When Paul was done speaking, he left. There is no mention of him being detained, arrested, or harassed. Another thing to notice (and really keep noticing right through the final words of the New Testament) is that no one perceived a Believer in Yeshua (like Paul) as being part of a new and distinct group of people. Jews perceived The Way (by now a mixture of Jews and gentiles) as but another of the several factions of Judaism. Gentiles didn't know enough about Judaism or Jewishness to make any kind of distinction about those Jewish sects and so for them those who followed Christ were Jews; or they were gentiles who adhered to Judaism. The point is that whereas we hear Bible teachers and commentators refer to the Believers at this time as "Christians" that creates a false mental picture because it imparts the sense that a new religion had been created called Christianity, which was separate from Judaism and separate from paganism. Eventually that would happen. But not until after the close of the Bible. Thus nowhere in the New Testament will we ever find such a thought.

But what is truly astounding is how the Lord worked through Paul in this crowd of Greeks; surrounded by statue after statue of Greek gods and goddesses and examined by the best most persuasive philosophers, some of his listeners actually came to believe. In fact one of the new Believers was Dionysius who was a member of the court. Interestingly it is a Christian Tradition (spoken about by the early Church Father Eusebius) that Dionysius became the first Church Bishop of Athens. Luke also informs us that a woman named Damaris came to Christ. What we do NOT read about is any baptisms, a no doubt sad ending to Paul's efforts in Athens.

Let's move on to Acts Chapter 18.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 18 all

From Athens Paul went to Corinth. Corinth of course is the subject audience of Paul's epistles to the Corinthians. I would like you to pay close attention to what goes on in Corinth here in

chapter 18 because this provides the background context to understand both the tone and the issues that Paul addresses with the Corinthians in the New Testament books of 1st and 2nd Corinthians.

The good news is that for the first time in a while, Paul didn't leave Athens in a state of riot after he had visited there. And he wasn't being chased and hounded, nor had he been roughed up or jailed. The bad news is that we're not given a clue as to why Paul decided to go to Corinth; so we'll not speculate. However we can determine that it is nearly certain that Paul arrived in Corinth in 50 A.D. This means that it has been between 15 and 20 years since Yeshua died on the cross in Jerusalem.

Corinth was an important place. It was located on the Isthmus of Corinth and thus was ideally suited as a center of commerce and shipping. It was a huge city for that day; there were 6 miles of walls surrounding the metropolis. It is estimated that the total population at that time was around 750,000 people; it was larger than Athens. Like most ancient cities this one had been destroyed and rebuilt more than once. In one such destruction in 146 B.C. it was leveled into a smoldering heap. It was rebuilt by Julius Caesar 100 years later. So by Paul's day it had grown to this staggering size and population in only about 90 years. Naturally Corinth maintained a sizeable Jewish population and boasted several synagogues. Paul would have had no trouble in finding Jews for hospitality. Thus we read in verse 2 that Paul found a Jew named Aquila. Aquila was from Pontus in Italy, and he was married to Priscilla. Priscilla's formal name was Prisca, and we will find Paul referring to her as Prisca in some of his epistles. Paul must have formed quite a bond with this couple because he mentions them (in a positive way) on numerous occasions. We are given the unexpected bit of information that Aquila and his wife came to Corinth because the Jews had been expelled from Rome by order of Emperor Claudius. So here we need to pause and realize that while Rome was religiously tolerant as a national policy, that doesn't mean that all were treated with equality.

F.F. Bruce notes something tantalizing; we have the record of Claudius' order to expel the Jews, but it is usually connected with a statement made by Suetonius that the Jews were sent away because "they were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus". It could well be that Chrestus is some rebellious trouble maker; but history seems to know nothing of him, if he existed at all. And this person would have focused his efforts among the Jewish community, obviously. However far more likely is that this is referring to Christ because Suetonius' statement is made in conjunction with explaining that the main source of the trouble in the Rome Jewish community was the introduction of The Way into the local synagogue there. This caused all kinds of dissention and led to more trouble than the Emperor wished to put up with.

As we've discussed before, Rome had little interest in the infighting that occurred within the various religions present in the Empire, provided it did not spill over into street violence, upset the rest of the population or threaten the Roman government. This applied to Judaism as well. So for Rome their concern was political; and when dissention arose for whatever reason, the government dealt with it as a civil/political issue; not a religious issue. Thus the expulsion of the Jews from Rome had nothing to do with Judaism. But it did have to do with a perceived troublesome tendency of Jewish people to cause discord in towns and cities where they lived.

This would have a great deal to do with how Nero would use the Jews as a scapegoat for his failed policies.

Some commentators say that because Aquila and Priscilla were Believers that it was only “Christians” that were expelled from Rome. There is no evidence for that at all; as I said there was no such thing as an identifiable people group called “Christians” until well after the New Testament was closed. In fact the Roman authorities constantly expressed total ignorance, and lack of interest, in involving themselves in the internal disputes of Judaism. The key bit of information for us is that Aquila and Priscilla were Jewish; not that they belonged to a particular sect of Judaism called The Way. The idea that Claudius would involve himself and sign a royal decree to expel only certain Jews (and no doubt a very few at that) is not plausible.

We can see immediately why Paul hit it off with Aquila and Priscilla: they were tentmakers just as he was. It is clear that Paul was supporting himself with his trade when he was in one place long enough. This actually was a common understanding for Rabbis and teachers. A rather standard saying that explains this viewpoint is found in the Mishnah and it says: “Do not make of the Torah....a spade with which to dig”. In other words, don’t teach the Torah as a means to enrich yourself. This by no means implies that a teacher or Rabbi couldn’t receive money for their efforts. But except in unusual circumstances that should not be the main source of their income. Rather Rabbis and teachers were expected to hold jobs. This is a good principle for both Christianity and Judaism. However not too close of a parallel should be drawn. Being a Rabbi was usually not an occupation; it was an office that a Jew held. Being a Rabbi wasn’t usually a career or a profession. So Paul worked as a tentmaker as did Aquila and Priscilla.

Societies at all times in history tend to sub-divide ourselves into cliques according to some standard or another. In Paul’s day the most common cause for the subdivision had to do with one’s occupation. So trade guilds were a customary means of society dividing themselves up into social units; it also represents the first attempt at organized labor so as to both police themselves and to assure that they were paid at some level that as a group they found acceptable. In fact, it was common that a synagogue was created and populated by members of a particular trade guild. However in the Roman world, blue collar laborers were looked down upon. Roman citizens did not usually indulge in manual labor as they saw it as beneath them. Thus we see that Jews (and other ethnicities no doubt) were the main source of labor for the Roman Empire; not because they were forced, but because tradecraft was seen in Jewish society as honorable. Thus it would be natural that in the Diaspora, Jews would practice their craft in a society that welcomed and needed it. Not surprisingly we find the biggest Jewish colonies within the biggest cities in the Roman Empire.

As vs. 4 states, Paul went to the local synagogue in Corinth every Shabbat in hopes of making new Believers. And we’re told that these synagogues contained both Jews and Greeks (gentiles). So almost everywhere we have followed Paul we find that some number of gentiles was worshipping the God of Israel alongside their Jewish friends. But by labeling them as God-fearers it is clear that most did not convert to Judaism by having a circumcision. How, exactly, the Jews dealt with the ritual purity issues that God-fearers caused we don’t know. Very likely, living so far from the Temple and the Priesthood, and living in a gentile dominated world for so

long, the majority of common everyday Jews simply didn't pay much attention to the Torah purity laws; but it is evident that the most pious among them did.

After some months without them, Timothy and Sila finally arrive from Macedonia and rejoin Paul. Their presence seems to have allowed Paul to do less of his trade craft to provide for himself and instead do more preaching of the Gospel. But note to whom he directed his renewed efforts: to the Jews. So while in a common way of speaking we can say that Paul was the disciple to the gentiles, we regularly find Paul's efforts directed towards Jews. In fact we're told that he taught "in depth" to the Jews about Yeshua being the Messiah. This means he was teaching them the Scripture passages (mostly the Prophets) that predicted the Messiah and then telling these Jews how Yeshua fulfilled those prophecies. So we see him taking the opposite approach with the Corinthian Jews that he took with the Athenians.

But, as usual, some of the Jews of the synagogues accepted Paul's teachings and others became disturbed by them. So verse 6 explains that after trying long enough, Paul gave up on certain ones who turned hostile and so Paul turned their fate over to the Lord. When he had had enough, Paul is said to have said: "Your blood be on your own heads. For my part I am clean...." This expression derives from the Torah concept of substitution, which is the central concept of the Levitical sacrificial system, and therefore of redemption in Messiah Yeshua. That is, instead of there being a means of atonement (and an innocent animal bearing the brunt of your offense) a person's actions will now bring upon that person what the Law prescribes for their offense. In this case the offense is to refuse the offer of salvation in Christ, and thus this amounts to blasphemy.

It should be noted that this is the first time we read of Paul refusing to address certain of the synagogue community any more. But let's also be careful with those final words of verse 6, which are "from now on I will go to the **goyim!**" Paul is by no means saying that he has just ended association with Jews or bringing the Good News to Jews. He is simply saying that his main attention is going to be to the gentiles. We know this is truth because as we continue in Acts we find him going directly to the synagogue in other cities he'll visit, and of his preaching to Jews.

We'll continue in Acts chapter 18 next time.