

The Gospel & The Scholars

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For most of us, our college days are a time in our lives centered around study, research, and learning. We are surrounded by scholars and knowledge: professors who are recognized experts in their respective fields, vast libraries holding the accumulated knowledge of the human race, and of course fellow students, some of whom (particularly at a graduate level) are rising scholars themselves. It is often during this time when we are exposed to new ideas and expected to utilize critical thinking, that our existing beliefs come under new scrutiny. Sometimes this is a purely introspective process, sometimes it occurs when others challenge our ideas. In academic environments, discussion of the Gospel and evangelism can play out a little differently than elsewhere.

In Acts 17:16-34 we are told of a visit Paul made to Athens, one that can be especially relevant for believers in an academic environment. In Paul's time Athens was a famous city, home to one of the greatest universities of the ancient world. It was in Athens that Plato and Aristotle taught and it is easy to see why Athens was renowned as a center of learning and philosophy. Paul didn't go there for those reasons; rather he was simply waiting there to meet two other believers before leaving for Corinth. But while Paul was waiting, he saw a great number of idols in the city and was disturbed by it. I have read that in Paul's time Athens had over 30,000 different idols. I don't know if that number is accurate, but clearly there were quite a few. As Paul toured Athens, in addition to the countless other altars around the city he came upon one inscribed "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." If you or I were to see a city so full of idols,

we might see only foolishness, and indeed it was, but when Paul saw all these altars also saw something else: an opportunity!

When a group of people erect altars to thousands upon thousands of gods, clearly they are longing to connect with something larger than themselves. Their expression of that longing was somewhat unusual in terms of the sheer number of altars they built, but the desire is universal. It has been said that everyone is made with a God-shaped hole in their heart, and that although we often try to fill it with other things, only God fits. The fact that after worshiping so many idols the Athenians still felt the need to erect yet another altar, this one to an unknown god, suggests that despite their efforts their longing remained unfulfilled. Seizing the opportunity, Paul began telling the Athenians about Jesus and His resurrection, and I think it is worth considering precisely how he interacted with the population of this famous university town.

We are told that he reasoned in the synagogue and the marketplace with those he met there. "Reasoned with" - that's an interesting description of an evangelical effort! We'll get back to that. We are also told that Epicurean and Stoic philosophers argued with him. In Paul's time, Epicureanism and Stoicism were popular Greek philosophies. Epicureans did not believe in an afterlife or in God or even the possibility of a loving and almighty God. Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism, articulated their argument in "the riddle of Epicurus." It goes something like this:

Why does evil exist in the world? If God is unable to prevent it then he is weak and therefore not God. If does he not want to stop it then he is wicked and therefore not God. Or he is both weak and wicked, and therefore certainly not God.

So they concluded that because evil exists, a loving and almighty God must not. They didn't believe in an afterlife either, so they advocated maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain in this life. One of their sayings that survives even today is "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we shall die." Stoics on the other hand had reached different conclusions. They believed that all

men shared a common Creator, but not in the sense we do. They concluded that the universe itself is God, and that God in the form of "Fate" directed even tiny details in the world. Their concept of God was of a powerful but impersonal force. They contended a man could always be happy if he learned to align his will with what fate had in store for him, and that doing so required reason not emotion. Stoics maintained that unhappiness and evil resulted from human ignorance and our propensity to neglect reason in favor of passion.

These were the contemporary Greek schools of thought when Paul appeared in Athens and began preaching. Eventually Paul was taken before the Areopagus, a Council of Athenian Elders, not because he was in some sort of trouble but because they wanted him to explain the "new teaching" he was introducing to Athens. Being a university town, Athens was always a center of lively debate about new ideas. The way Paul approached his discussion with the Athenians was quite logical. The Athenians had already postulated the existence of an unknown god, so Paul started there. And as Paul continued, he addressed many of the questions that the Greek philosophers had been wrestling with, such as the "riddle of Epicurus." He even quoted Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus in his arguments. Paul presented God the loving and almighty Creator and explained why God interacts with mankind and the world the way that He does. Paul pointed out that while we are dependent upon God for everything, God needs **nothing** from us, but arranges the world and our lives as He does so that we will reach out to find Him. Paul concluded his comments to the Areopagus with a rather forceful argument; he submitted that if the view of God he was presenting, revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ, was false then how could they explain Christ's resurrection? Although I suspect that Paul spoke with conviction and zeal at the Areopagus, he used rational arguments to make his case for the Christian faith. Essentially, Paul reasoned with these men of reason. In my own life and career I have been very fortunate to know a number of scholars, some more famous than others, and I

can tell you that scholars tend to be careful and deliberate thinkers. Consequently, I think Paul used the right strategy and I doubt that impassioned oratory alone would gotten him very far.

But there is another element to Paul's comments before the Areopagus that should be considered. Paul reasoned with the Athenians, and rightly so but he was only academic with them up to a point. The Greeks philosophers were thinking about God in purely academic terms, essentially treating Him like a mathematical theorem to be examined and proved or disproved. Paul was rational with these men in their discussion together, but he also got personal. He boldly asserted that God is not far from any of us, that He is not evasive or elusive, that we are dependent upon Him for life itself, and that ultimately it is He that will judge us. Paul's point is that God is not just a concept to be contemplated, not a mere puzzle to be solved, but our loving Creator who desires a personal relationship with each one of us. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the ultimate expression of that desire, and the foundation of our relationship with Him.

So how did it all turn out in Athens? If we read Acts 17:34 we might get the impression that only a handful of people were converted and that Paul's stay wasn't exactly a spectacular missionary success. Something else that I've learned about scholars over the years is that they **do** change their minds, but seldom do it quickly. Paul may not have converted all of Athens that day but a few generations later Athens, the famous university city of antiquity, was predominantly Christian.

Looking at Paul's experience in Athens, I think there are several lessons for those of us living and working in academic environments. First, don't be afraid to take advantage of unexpected opportunities to share our faith with others in appropriate times and places. Second, it is good to be logical and rational with people who have a scholarly mindset so long as we don't forget that ultimately faith is not the product of our deductions and arguments. It is the result of

experiencing a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And finally, if you have an opportunity to put in a good word for Christ, don't be discouraged if you don't see immediate results. Scholars do change their minds, but seldom quickly.