Text: Acts 17:22-23
Title: Paul's Sermon at Athens, Part 1
Truth: We must not worship idols, nor worship God in ignorance!
Date/Location: Wednesday Prayer Meeting 10/9/2013 and 10/16/2024 at FBC
[I also preached this as a portion of an extemporaneous sermon at Howell 10/13/2013 evening service, Acts 17:1-31.]

Introduction

When Paul preached to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue, he started at a place that they implicitly agreed upon as common between them, and that is the Old Testament. Notice, for instance, 17:2 and 17:11.

When Paul preached to pagans, he started from the beginning at creation (17:24). This is as far back as you can go to find a common ground with a person because everyone has a sense of the existence of God from the creation (Romans 1:19-20). The fact that everything had some kind of beginning makes sense to most people.

It seems that we can draw a valid principle from these examples. The principle is that when you are talking to someone about the gospel, you use as a starting point the most recent common ground that you can. You start with creation when evangelizing an idolater, with the Old Testament when evangelizing a Jew, or somewhere in the New Testament if you have a professing Christian like a Catholic or other person who does not grasp the true gospel of Jesus Christ (either His person or His work, or both). A particular person may not *really* believe the Old or New Testament, but at least if they profess to believe it, you have a starting point to work from.

I. Introduction of the Sermon, v. 22-23

A. Paul was not shy. He had a message to proclaim, and he did so, even in the highest court of the land. He "stood in the midst" of the court.

B. Paul was somewhat familiar with their religious background. He had considered the objects of their devotion; he "studied" them, if you will. I do not believe he studied them in great detail as if he had to go to a comparative religions class or a special catechism for each god or religion, but he learned enough to know what the idols were and the people's interaction with them.

C. In the city was an altar with the inscription, "to the unknown God." This provided an opening for Paul to introduce his evangelistic message.

1. Some interpreters understand this to mean that the Athenians were making a philosophical statement about the realm of the gods, that it was unknowable. There likely were some Athenians who thought that way, but it is doubtful that all Athenians thought this way. Many of the Athenians *did* worship *specific* gods and they must have claimed to have specific knowledge about those gods. They did not worship deities that they did not know, but rather ones they *did* know. In fact, the deities they claimed to know were previously the inventions of sinfully clever human minds. So someone had to know those "gods" because they made them up!

2. Among the community, there may have been some who worshipped one god or another; and some who were polytheists and worshipped many of the gods. And perhaps there were some individuals who said that the realm of the gods was unknowable but they thought that unknowable god was the best one to worship.

3. And there were probably some who thought differently, that worshipped many gods, and were happy to include a god who they did not know "just in case" so they would not offend any god that they forgot about!

4. I am making the case that there is diversity in idolatry. Paul is speaking to the "you" plural of the community, not just one or another individual, so we have to consider all of these possibilities. From what Paul saw, it was quite evident that they did *not* know the true God.

5. We can also be confident in the assertion that the Athenians believed in some kind of supernaturalism. There were one or more gods who they appealed to as the cause of things they could not otherwise explain.

D. The fact that Paul *even* found an altar with that inscription to the unknown God shows just how religious/superstitious these Athenians are. Their idolatry was to the point of ridiculousness.

1. The word "very religious" can mean "superstitious" but Paul probably did not open his sermon with a derogatory term. He probably used it in the sense of devout and religious. They were obviously very concerned about deities and the like. And yes, they probably were superstitious in that they were afraid of offending some deity with their actions. They perhaps lived a fearful existence where any wrong move might cause them big trouble. They might have avoided certain things in a silly kind of hat-tip to one deity or another. This is no way to live a fulfilled or happy life.

2. Our culture does not have that level of concern for the supernatural, although there are individuals who do. This is because science and philosophy have drummed the ideas of supernaturalism out of the collective mindset of humanity.

E. They were ignorant of the true God, whom Paul would now begin to preach to them to fill in the critical gaps in their knowledge.

F. I believe that when Paul said they "worshipped without knowing," he meant the people bowed down an idol that represented an unknown god. They did not truly worship the God of the Bible without being conscious of it. Someone might argue, "See, they *were* worshipping the true God, they just did not know it!" But they did not know this God, and you cannot worship the true God without knowing Him. Worship to something you do not know is not really worship. *That* would be superstition, or blind, meaningless religion. Such is not true faith. You can, like Paul does, call it worship for lack of a better term to describe "fake worship."

G. Going back to the "common ground" theme that I mentioned earlier, I wanted to consider this question: are all or most people "religious"? The answer, I believe, is yes. Most people have some sort of belief system hat touches on things that have to do with the meaning of life, the afterlife, sin, judgment, morality, God, Jesus, the spiritual world, demons, etc. In reality, all people have a faith system of some sort. Buddhists, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and many other smaller groups "believe" in some specific things in these areas. Atheists "believe" that they have the truth in these matters. See Romans 1:19-21.

In the United States, a recent Gallup poll found 47% of people consider themselves religious; 33% as spiritual, another 2% as both, for a total of 82%. 18% say they are neither religious nor spiritual, which has doubled from 1999. Generic belief in God and prayer have declined, but not nearly as much as the decline in church attendance and membership.

We can use much the same starting point as Paul: almost everyone is a religious person in some fashion. Even the 18% that are not have some beliefs on moral issues that touch the same topics as religious belief, even if called by another name.

Whatever the case of the person we are talking to, we can do this: we can "proclaim" to people the God who deserves to be worshipped and in Whose care we exist.

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