

Too Smart for God

This morning I may well strike some nerves and step on a few toes. My intent is not to make anyone uncomfortable but to challenge each of us to think. We live in a time and a society that is filled with technology and many wonders that were not even imagined just a few years ago. This may cause us to believe that we are more enlightened than any other age, race, or people—this is erroneous.

This complacency is just as prevalent in religion as it is in other areas of our world. For example, in theology, we study God. We seek to understand, from our limited capacity, the nature and mind of an infinite being. Yet, in theology, there are some who reason that God and His word (the Bible) are a mythical and they reside within a culture or race of people. The question I pose here is when we reach this understanding of God; have we substituted our logic and reasoning for God?

Okay, this may be a great conversation to have over coffee in a den or on a front porch; where is our message for today? We will look at an event that is recorded by Luke in his history of the early church. We will follow Paul as he shares the message of Jesus with everyone who will listen.

In the 16th chapter of Acts, Paul goes to Macedonia to share the good news of Christ. He leaves that region and travels to Thessalonica where he makes converts among some of the Jews, God-fearing Greeks and a number of leading women. (Acts 17:4) Some of the Jews are not happy and chase Paul, Silas, and Timothy to Berea.

In Berea, we learn that Paul once more starts talking about Jesus and making disciples. We may remember that Luke comment: **Now these (*Bereans*) 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 17:11 NASB)**

The Jews from Thessalonica go to Berea and Paul is taken to Athens. He waits there for Silas and Timothy to join him. This brings us to the scripture for today. Paul meets with the philosophers of his day.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. 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. And also, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. 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. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so, we want to know what these things mean.” (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) (Acts 17:16-21 NASB)

Who were the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers? They were rival schools of philosophy in Athens. Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) held that pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death. He did not deny the existence of gods but argued in deistic fashion that they took no interest in the lives of people.

Zeno (340-265 B.C.) was the founder of Stoicism. His teaching centered on living harmoniously with nature and emphasized one's rational abilities and individual self-sufficiency. Theologically, he was essentially pantheistic and thought of God as "the World-soul."

These philosophers heard Paul and called him a babblers. He did not make sense according to their reasoning. They take him to the Areopagus which is a rock prominence just outside Athens. There they bring Paul before the Council of Ares. (Ares is the Greek god of war. The Roman god of war is Mars thus the term "Mars Hill.")

It is interesting that Luke mentions that **Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.** It may be like so many today rather spend their time debating theology and philosophy than actually accomplishing anything.

At this point, Paul has an audience and Paul does what he does best-he proclaims Christ.

So, Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 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.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 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; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' Being then the children 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. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent, 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."

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 17:22-32 NASB)

Paul departs from many of the sermons we have recorded in the Bible. He does not fall back on Jewish history or the prophets. Instead, he begins with the altar to the unknown god. Paul began on common ground with his hearers and sought to lead them from it to accept the work and person of Jesus as the apex of God's redemptive work for humanity. The substance of this address is the nature of God and the responsibility of human beings to God. Paul speaks of God as the one who created the world and everything in it; he is the Lord of heaven and earth. He does not live in temples "made by hands," nor is he dependent for his existence upon anything he has created. Rather, he is the source of life and breath and everything else humanity possesses. Contrary to the Athenians' boast that they had originated from the soil of their Attic homeland and therefore were not like other people, Paul affirms the oneness of humankind in their creation by the one God and their descent from a common ancestor. And contrary to the "deism" that permeated the philosophies of the day, he proclaimed that this God has determined specific times for humans and "the exact places where they should live," so that they would seek him and find him.

In support of this teaching about humankind, Paul quotes two maxims from Greek poets. The first ("For in him we live and move and have our being") comes from the Cretan poet Epimenides (c. 600 B.C.); the second ("for we are his offspring"), from the Cilician poet Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.). By such maxims, Paul is not suggesting that God is to be thought of in terms

of the Zeus of Greek polytheism or Stoic pantheism. He is rather arguing that the poets his hearers recognized as authorities have to some extent corroborated his message. In his search for a measure of common ground with his hearers, he is, so to speak, disinfecting and rebaptizing the poets' words for his own purposes. But despite its form, Paul's address was thoroughly biblical and Christian in its content.

There is no historical evidence that Paul or anyone else ever established a church in Athens. Paul did not convince the philosophers to leave their reasonings to embrace the one true God. It seems that the idea of the resurrection was too much for them to accept.

Why would you suppose that Luke shared this exchange between Paul and those philosophers on the hill just outside the city of Athens? It may well be that Luke was guided by the Holy Spirit to share with us today that people will use philosophy, reason, and logic to lure us away from God. There are people who are so secure in their understanding of the universe that they will never change their view. This is not to say that we should never share the message of the gospel. Rather, it means that we need to see when our efforts to share are futile and refuse to become entangled in pointless arguments and speculations. Paul wrote to the church in Colossae and to the young preacher Timothy and warned them not to be deceived not pulled into those fruitless debates.

Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and overflowing with gratitude*. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:6-8 NASB)

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly *and* empty chatter *and* the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge”— which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. (1 Timothy 6:20-21 NASB)

Just as Paul stood with the philosophers outside the city of Athens, we may find ourselves defending our faith in God to people who are “too smart for God.” After all, they have received the best education available, they have read the latest books that explain away God, Jesus, the creation, and miracles. They are enlightened. We are clinging to a mythological belief in fairy-tales that are designed to explain things when modern knowledge is lacking.

Yet, when we honestly consider the relevant questions about the universe, only God fully answers those questions. May our prayer and life ambition be that we never become too smart for God.