

Acts 17:22-34 ~ Teacher's Lesson
Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey: Athens

Teacher's Note: Draw simple map on board of the Mediterranean world before class begins. Show modern Israel, Syria, Cyprus, Turkey and Greece. Leave room for the Acts chart, below.

Context: At the end of their 1st missionary journey to Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13-14), Paul and Barnabas sailed back to their home base, Antioch, where they remained a long time, teaching, 14:24-28, 15:35. On Paul's 2nd missionary journey, he and Silas first traveled back to strengthen some of the churches established on the 1st journey, then sailed over to Greece.

Missions Geography:

1st Missionary Journey—Cyprus and south-central Turkey (Galatia)

2nd Missionary Journey—Northern Greece (Macedonia): Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth (for at least 18 months!).

Acts & The Epistles: Draw the first part of the chart that is at the end of this lesson, showing the 1st & 2nd Missionary Journeys (Acts 13-18) and when the various epistles were written in relation to what Paul was doing on those two trips.

******What unusual invitation to speak did Paul receive in Athens (17:16-21)?** He was asked by the philosophers to speak to them at a meeting in the Aeropagus.

What was it about Athens that particularly vexed Paul (17:16)? See *1 Corinthians 10:20*. The city was full of idols. Athens was so known for idols that a writer named Petronius wrote that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens.¹

What word did Luke use to describe Paul's evangelism in the marketplace (17:17)? It says that the "reasoned" in the marketplace. He did not preach "at" them, he reasoned with them. The marketplace featured large, sheltered passage ways called *stoas*. The philosophers gathered under these passages to give or listen to lectures. Paul's presentation led to the invitation to speak at the Areopagus, 17:18.

Based on 17:18-20, what range of reactions did the philosophers have to Paul's message? Their reactions ranged from seeing him as a babler to a having vague understanding that he was preaching about a strange foreign deity.

Based on 17:18, what did the philosophers understand Paul to teach about Jesus? The philosophers understood that Jesus was some sort of divine being who had risen from the dead. They were accurate in their understanding. Jehovah God took on flesh and became Jesus. He is Jehovah Jesus!

¹ *ESV Study Bible*, 2121

What did these Epicurean and Stoic philosophers believe (17:18)?

Epicureans: In today’s usage, rich, sumptuous food is sometimes called an “Epicurean’s delight” and is associated with luxurious indulgence. The Epicurean philosophy was based on the teachings of a man named Epicurus. They did not believe in life after death, so materialism and pleasure was seen as the chief goal of life. Paradoxically, they thought that contentment ultimately came through limiting one’s desires (serene detachment).²

Stoics: Today we might say of someone, “He’s very stoic”. What we mean by this is that he can endure pain or hardship without showing any emotion. The name Stoic comes from a famous, large porch in Athens where the founder of Stoicism taught (a porch was called a *stoa*). They saw God as an inherent universal reason they called the *logos*. They sought happiness through limiting their desires so as to avoid disappointment. They had a high standard of moral conduct.³ They believed in serving their fellow man, not out of love, but with disinterested virtue.

These philosophers invited Paul to speak to the Areopagus. What was the Areopagus (17:19)? The Areopagus was both a place and a council. The place is a hill northwest of Athens. Literally translated, Areopagus means “hill of Ares” (pronounced *Árēs*—the Greek god of war). The council probably met in a colonnade rather than up on the hill.⁴ It held great prestige in matters of morals and religion.⁵

According to 17:21, how did the men of Athens pass their time? Rather than working at a normal job, they spent their time telling about new things or listening to reports of new things. In this sense it was the university of their day.⁶

******1. Earlier we read how Paul was bothered by all the idols in Athens (17:16). How did Paul use idolatry to introduce the Gospel (17:22-31)?** He saw an idol to an unknown god (*agnostos theos*) and used that to introduce the unknown god—the only and true God! He then showed **1**) how we are created by God, **2**) how He does not dwell in any man-made temple, and **3**) how He does not need to be served by humans. Paul further said **4**) since people are God’s offspring, God is not like any idol made by man out of gold or silver or stone.

² *New Bible Dictionary*, 340

³ *Ibid.*, 1145

⁴ Kistemaker, 628

⁵ *New Bible Dictionary*, 81.

⁶ Kistemaker, 629.

2. Would the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers have been offended by Paul's attack on the idols, or would they have agreed with him (17:22-31)? Both groups rejected idol worship. The Epicureans saw it as a superstitious, irrational belief. The Stoics believed in a close kinship between man and God and so rejected idols as inappropriate. What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then attempt to lead them a step further in their thinking.⁷

Evangelism Insight: When seeking a way to begin a gospel conversation, find a point of agreement. Look for something the other person believes or holds dear as a potential point of entry (a television show, a movie, a book, something related to sports, children, family, politics, etc.).

3. What did Paul reveal about human origins from 17:26? *See Mark 10:6-7.* Paul believed that all people are descended from a single man (Adam). Jesus taught the same:

ESV **Mark 10:6-7** . . . from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'

4. Based on 17:26-27, why did God establish allotted periods and boundaries for mankind? *See Acts 14:17.* The text seems to indicate it was so "that they should seek God" (17:27).

God's Goodness: This is similar to what Paul said earlier to the pagan crowd in Lystra:

ESV **Acts 14:17** . . . [God] did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

The "allotted periods" (17:26) may refer to the four seasons and the "boundaries" may refer to the inhabitable parts of the earth (not national borders). On the other hand, it may refer to the rise and fall of nations and the geographical areas they possess. In any event, the point seems to be the goodness of God in providing for people's needs and causing them to seek Him.⁸

Application: Consider that your neighbor may be your neighbor because God sovereignly put him there. Why? God put him there so that he'll be attracted to the Gospel, 17:27. It is no accident that the people near you are there. He wants them to hear about Jesus (from you!). Grasp God's sovereignty and align your day with His mission.⁹

5. How can 17:27 be harmonized with Romans 3:11b ("no one seeks for God")? Since no one on their own seeks God, He engineered the periods and boundaries so as to cause people to seek Him. For example, it is said that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. However, if his oats are salted ahead of time, he will drink the water!

6. Why did Paul conclude that God is actually not far from each of us (17:27-28)? It is because we live and move and exist in God even as a fish does in water.

⁷ Marshall, 298.

⁸ Marshall, 305.

⁹ Rico Tice, "4 Verses That Transformed My Evangelism", TheGospelCoalition.org. Accessed March 25, 2018.

Omnipresence: The fact that God is everywhere simultaneously at all times is called is omnipresence.

How is the biblical doctrine of God's omnipresence different from pantheism?

Where are these quotes from (17:28)? The quotes are from two pagan poets.

7. Why did Paul quote from pagan poets rather than inspired Scripture (17:28)? Since his audience had no appreciation of the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul quoted from their own pagan poets to make his point. Quoting from the poet was obviously intended by Paul to help make his presentation more convincing.

Example: When witnessing to a Muslim, use the Quran when possible.

Off Track: The modern "seeker friendly" church movement could be seen as a modern attempt to follow Paul's example of quoting from pagan poets. It is church for people who don't do church. In an effort to make church appealing to the secular mindset, seeker friendly churches will often switch over to what they call "contemporary worship". The music and instrumentation is more like a rock concert, the hymn book is discarded as archaic and irrelevant, the pastor dresses down in hip street clothes, traditional church architecture (steeple, stained glass, pulpit) is replaced with a corporate look or even concern hall feel, religious wording is taboo (Christianese), and appeals are made frequently to popular movies, T.V. shows, secular music or current events. This may be fine, but too often sight is lost of the true objective. The historical doctrines of the Faith are thrown overboard to make the message even more appealing. The problem is that they end up sailing the seas in an empty sea with no cargo. *Does the virgin birth bother you? Get rid of it. Does the doctrine of substitutionary atonement seem like the left-over relic of a bloody, barbaric, unenlightened religion? Do away with it. Is scriptural inerrancy hard to defend? Abandon it! Is teaching the Bible too boring? Replace it with feel-good topical messages based on pop psychology. Afraid you might offend people if you condemn their sinful lifestyles? No problem: focus exclusively on God's grace and love. Compromising the Truth is something Paul never did.*

8. Paul agreed with the Pagan poet that we are God's offspring. How does man being God's offspring prove God is not like an idol (17:29)? Wood, silver and gold are not God's offspring, are not like God.

What action did Paul call for from his audience in 17:30? He called on them to repent.

9. In this context, what would it have meant to Paul's hearers to repent (17:30)? Repent is from *metanoeo* and literally means a change of thinking. They needed to change their wrong thinking about God to start believing that Jesus is God and that He arose from the dead.

10. What reason did Paul give for people to repent (17:30-31)? It is because God has appointed a day of judgment by the resurrected Jesus. The wages of sin is death, and there will be a payday some day.

Resurrection Implications: Evangelicals today tend to present Jesus to unbelievers as their potential Savior: Jesus' resurrection proves He has conquered death. In this case, Paul presented Jesus to unbelievers as their potential Judge: Jesus' resurrection assures us there is a day of judgment coming.

******How did the Areopagus respond to Paul's message (17:32-34)?** As is to be expected with any group of people, some mocked, some wanted to hear more, and some believed.

11. What doctrine in particular caused some to mock (17:32)? The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was too much for the Epicureans who, like the Sadducees, did not believe in life after death.

12. Why did Luke record the names of these two people who believed (17:34)? Perhaps they were well-known people. For example, Dionysius was an Areopagite—a member of the Areopagus. Perhaps it was just a human touch.

13. Paul wrote the letter of Galatians to the churches of Galatia. He wrote Philippians to the church in Philippi, and 1 & 2 Thessalonians to the church in Thessalonica. What letter did he write to the church in Athens? We have no record of any letter to the church in Athens. Though Paul did not get as many positive results as in other places, his time there was not a failure. Paul faithfully made known the Gospel and called people to repentance. A successful witness is someone who shares Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaves the results to God.

So What?

14. What lessons in evangelism can be derived from this passage?

15. What was Luke's purpose in recording all the things that happened in this passage? It was probably to show the forward progress of the Gospel despite all the opposition. It is an overall picture of Acts 1:8 being fulfilled.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
- You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.Com/NTRF.

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