

Superstition or Truth

Paul vs. Philosophers in Athens

“Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens,
I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.”
Acts 17:22

Preparatory Reading: Acts 17; Colossians 2; Ecclesiastes 1; Ecclesiastes 12.

Introduction:

1. We recently completed a commentary on Ecclesiastes and reviewed Solomon’s inspired philosophy.
2. Here is God’s philosophical answer to all worldly men: <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/ecclesiastes-book-format.pdf>.
3. Paul by the Holy Ghost mocked and rejected the world’s philosophy (Col 2:8,18-23; I Tim 6:20-21).
4. We recently examined the Seven Sacraments of the RCC to expose their diabolical heresies and lies.
5. Here is God’s ridicule of their blasphemous inventions: <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/seven-sacraments-slides.pdf>.
6. Paul by the Spirit said the RCC is under strong delusion to believe lies to be damned (II Thes 2:9-13).
7. Worldly philosophy and/or Roman Catholicism has the highest esteem of educated or religious men.
8. Both worldly philosophy and Roman Catholicism are superstitious to a devilish degree against truth.
9. **Superstition.** Unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious, or imaginary, esp. in connexion with religion; religious belief or practice founded upon fear or ignorance. An irrational religious system; a false, pagan, or idolatrous religion.
10. The gospel truth of Jesus Christ – the apostolic faith of the Bible – denies and defies both devilish lies.
11. They greatly outnumber us, out-publish us, have greater intellects, and can kill us like they did before.
12. But we must not take a backseat to philosophers or popes, for truth by Solomon and Paul destroy both.
13. Our Leader and Commander is far above their politics, education, military, wealth, etc. Jesus is Lord!
14. Noah had only his family totaling eight when God sent a watery grave on every single enemy of His.
15. But let our passionate commitment to live the gospel far exceed our mental or intellectual assent to it.

Note: To enhance the Background section next, use this intro and map: <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/paul-second-preaching-trip-slides.pdf>.

Background:

1. This section of church history recorded in Acts tells how Paul took the gospel to Europe.
2. Paul’s first preaching trip began with prayer and ended with review (Acts 13:1 – 14:28).
3. Paul then went to Jerusalem to unite the apostles against Jewish legalists (Ac 15:1-35).
4. Paul’s second preaching trip confirmed the churches they had started (Ac 15:36 – 16:5).
5. The Holy Ghost cut Paul off every way but west – to send him to Europe (Ac 16:6-12).
6. He started a church in Philippi of Macedonia, then left to avoid trouble (Acts 16:13-40).
7. Paul traveled from Philippi to Thessalonica to start another church there (Acts 17:1-9).
8. He then traveled to Berea, still in Macedonia, and had much fruit there (Acts 17:10-12).
9. After trouble in Berea, the brethren got Paul out of town to Athens (Acts 17:13-15).
10. While in Athens awaiting his helpers, Paul engaged this worldly city (Acts 17:16-34).
11. After Athens, Paul went farther south in Achaia to Corinth for 18 months (Ac 18:1-17).
12. He returned to his home church in Antioch via Ephesus and Jerusalem (Acts 18:18-22).

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

- A. Paul was in Athens after escaping trouble in Philippi, Thessalonica, and then in Berea.
- B. He awaited the arrival of Silas and Timotheus, his main companions on this second trip.
- C. He observed that this great worldly city of learning was obsessively addicted to idolatry.
 - 1. Historians say this city had more idols than any other city and more than inhabitants.
 - 2. Consider well that its preceding learning and philosophy resulted in such ignorance.
 - 3. Paul did not care at all about all the interesting things of architecture or philosophy.
 - 4. Can you ignore the noise to discern the situation and trends of religious compromise?
- D. How could critical thinkers, willing to consider most any idea, end up vain idolaters?
 - 1. Because God declared via Paul that rejecting Him would bring it (Romans 1:21-23).
 - 2. Furthermore Paul also taught from heaven that sodomy would result (Rom 1:24-27).
- E. This had the effect of stirring up his spirit to declare the truth to these ignorant pagans.
 - 1. Jesus had charged His apostles to reprove the world for sin (Jn 16:8-11; 12:31-32).
 - 2. Do you have a spirit that hates God's enemies and wants to do something about it?
 - 3. While you may not have been called to preach, you can live the truth (Proverbs 28:4).

17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

- A. The *therefore* here, indicating a conclusion, is what his stirred-up spirit chose to do.
- B. He assessed three differing options to oppose the rampant idolatry that he had observed.
 - 1. He defended Christ in the synagogue to monotheistic Jews, as usual (Acts 17:1-4).
 - 2. He included devout Gentile proselytes connected to the Jews' religion (Acts 13:43).
 - 3. He went to the market, since there was no Internet or other forum, to preach Christ.
 - 4. Since it was Athens, as will be explained, there was daily exchange of information.

18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

- A. **Philosophy.** The love, study, or pursuit of wisdom, or of knowledge of things, and their causes, whether theoretical or practical. That department of knowledge or study which deals with ultimate reality, or with the general causes and principles of things. The system which a person forms for the conduct of life. [OED].
- B. **Epicureanism.** The philosophy based on teachings of the Greek Epicurus (341-270 BC). We simplistically summarize it as *eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die*. Jesus and Paul spoke of such a lifestyle and its adherents (Luke 12:13-21; I Cor 15:32).
- C. **Stoicism.** The school of Greek philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early third century BC. We simplistically summarize it as indifferent to pain, pleasure, grief, or joy; the self-disciplined approach to life minimizing emotion for efficiency.
- D. Some philosophers, arrogant in their presumptive learning, mocked Paul as a babblers.

- E. Others discerned his unheard of religion concerning the risen Jesus Christ of Nazareth.
1. The gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection are important to establish this key fact.
 2. The apostles, including Paul, had to be eyewitnesses of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.
 3. There is nothing quite like the resurrection of Jesus compared to manmade religion.
 4. When we engage the world, we want to quickly get to what counts – Jesus the Lord.
 5. Paul will do this again shortly, when he brings Mars' Hill face to face with Jesus.

19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?

- A. **Areopagus.** The Latin equivalent for the Greek Hill of Mars, or thus, Mars' Hill.
1. A hill at Athens near the temple of Mars where the highest judicial city court sat.
 2. By comparing scripture, you can see these two terms are synonyms (Acts 17:19,22).
- B. God's providence for this forum is marvelous in our eyes; you should love reading it.
1. Since the Athenians loved to hear new things, they wanted to hear Paul's doctrine.
 2. If ever there was an audience of "seekers," this was it, but Paul did not stoop far.
 3. His audience was the most intellectual men of the most intellectual city in existence.
- C. The Greeks sought wisdom, but in their pursuit, they never found truth (I Cor 1:18-24).

20 For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.

- A. We enjoy reading of Paul being asked to speak in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14-15).
- B. Would to God more wanted to hear the meaning of strange things. We would help them.
- C. But this generation assumes it knows everything and would rather be taking selfies.

21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.)

- A. Athens' citizens were committed to learning, study, and did not want to miss anything.
- B. The city had regular travelers and visitors for the benefit of hearing most knowledge.
- C. But this appetite for truth would never reach beyond lies until men are born of the Spirit.

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

- A. What an opportunity! Paul was invited, given the podium, and asked about his religion.
- B. Ignorance – creation – providence – knowability – repentance – judgment – then Jesus.
- C. Are you prepared and ready to speak the certain words of truth to others (Pr 22:17-21)?
- D. His opening statement does not show the least fear or reverence of these philosophers.
1. He accused them, the most explorative thinkers on earth, of being very superstitious.
 2. These were the most intellectual and educated men in the world in some respects.
 3. His generalization, which he did not modify, reduced their city and lives to vanity.
 4. If you doubt his bold, possibly offensive approach, recall *disputed* above (Ac 17:17).
 5. He did not intentionally antagonize them, but he drew a certain line in the sand.

- E. **Superstition.** Unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious, or imaginary, esp. in connexion with religion; religious belief or practice founded upon fear or ignorance. An irrational religious system; a false, pagan, or idolatrous religion.
- F. Most modern versions corrupt this verse to read ... *very religious* ... to protect Greeks.
 1. Gnostic influence of wisdom worship affects much theology and textual criticism.
 2. I do like Wycliffe's translation here ... *by all things I see you as vain worshippers.*
 3. I do like Darby's translation for a change ... *I see you given up to demon worship.*
 4. But the King James Versions has God's words – *in all things ye are too superstitious.*
 5. Review modern Bibles on this verse ... <https://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/17-22-compare.html>.

23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

- A. Paul did rely on hearsay about the Athenians, but he used a clear example he had found.
 1. We never have to rely on hearsay in this generation, for all knowledge is available.
 2. The more we can deal with facts rather than blustering accusations, it is much better.
 3. The recent study of Rome's sacraments quoted and pictured their many practices.
- B. These ignorant and superstitious idolaters had an altar to cover any god they might miss.
 1. We do not for a second think these reprobates unconverted elect pursuing Jehovah.
 2. These foolish idolaters were pantheists (Stoicks) or deistic polytheists (Epicureans).
 3. Among the many Greek deities, these fearful speculators were covering all bets.
 4. There was a synagogue in Athens for Jehovah or monotheism, and they did not care.
- C. Paul accused them of ignorance, without allowing a zeal of God like Israel (Ro 10:1-4).
- D. He simply used this prop to enhance and further his speech, negatively and positively.
 1. Paul told them he would identify the true and living God they were ignorant about.
 2. Neither Athenian sect believed in the clear personal creator Jehovah (Rom 1:20-23).

24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

- A. Paul used creation of the universe as an attribute of God that put Him over their worship.
 1. The natural creation is enough proof of God to make all men guilty (Rom 1:18-23).
 2. A basic feature of true faith includes confidence in creation *ex nihilo* (Heb 11:1,6).
- B. He is the supernatural ruler of the universe, so He is not confined to your stone temples.
 1. The immensity, complexity, and sovereignty of creation rejects need for any man.
 2. When Paul spoke of God as Lord of heaven and earth, he introduced his sovereignty.
- C. While He is heavenly Father to us, let us remember to others that He is Creator of all.

25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

- A. Paul used the providence of earthly life as an attribute of God putting Him above them.

1. **Providence.** The foreknowledge and beneficent care and sovereign government of God over all events of human existence; divine direction, control, or guidance.
 2. Never forget this attribute and activity of God for revelation to men (Acts 14:15-17).
 3. Solomon referred to it often viewing life (Ec 3:10-14; 7:13-14; 8:17; 9:1-3; 11:5 etc.).
- B. Since all men are creatures He sustains, it is impossible that He might need man's help.
1. Based on the source of life, breath, and all things to survive, man cannot assist Him.
 2. Paul here appealed to worshipping God in spirit and truth – *spirit* as the only vehicle.

26 And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

- A. Regardless of nationality or skin color, all men created on earth are of the same nature.
1. This God has made all men, so they as creatures cannot advance or help the Creator.
 2. Paul then made these arrogant and pompous men no better than the worst barbarian.
 3. Charles Drew, M.D., an African-American, proved the first clause true literally ([here](#)).
- B. The Creator God's providence has appointed and determined all events that affect men.
1. All national events – economic cycles, military successes, famines, weather, etc.
 2. Never forget this attribute and activity of God for revelation to men (Acts 14:15-17).
- C. The Creator God's providence has appointed and determined the boundaries of nations.
1. It is hard to grasp why people choose to live in Siberia, the Sudan, or Syria, etc.
 2. But God distributed all men around the planet by language differences after Babel.

27 That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

- A. God's creation and providence both show His eternal power and Godhead for worship.
- B. Men are without excuse by these two compounding evidence for His sovereign role.
- C. God is not far from any man, if he would only humble himself and look up in wisdom.

28 For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.

- A. God by creation and providence is near, sustaining all men, and we originate from Him.
1. Paul sourced confirming testimony of this natural fact known by all (Psalm 19:1-6).
 2. He continued his argument that idolatry was superstitious and contrary to reason.
- B. To confirm his point that God is not far off, Paul quoted two of their poets, not scripture.
1. This point teaches much wisdom – adapt your explanation of truth to the audience.
 2. When with Jews, Paul appealed to scripture (Acts 9:20-22; 13:33-35; 17:1-4; 18:28).
 3. Paul did not quote a pagan to honor his religion or life, but to confirm natural truth.
 4. Paul did not quote a pagan his faith, but to use Goliath's sword and Egyptian spoil.
 5. It is wisdom to find the button of your audience and pick the best small pill for it.
 6. This does not mean a minister of the gospel need search the dunghill for a rare stone.
 7. Hate liberty less than scripture that would condemn pagan literature for any reason.

8. Be not righteous over much or over wise (Eccl 7:16). Some of you can scare me.
 9. Stop fussing about words; they evolve into acceptable use e.g. *potluck* and *Sunday*.
 10. Stop fussing about titles; public titles are unrelated to aspects of relations e.g. *father*.
- C. Paul quoted the Greek poet and seer Epimenides of Crete for the first half of this verse.
1. Epimenides was a good friend of Athens and used these words in his poem *Cretica*.
 2. Paul also used this work *Cretica* by Epimenides in his epistle to Titus (Tit 1:12-13).
- D. Paul quoted Aratus, who phrased these relevant words in a hymn to the Greek god Zeus.
1. Aratus was from Paul's own country of Cilicia, but he had been a student in Athens.
 2. This poem by Aratus was well known by Greeks and would have endeared Paul well.
- E. This outstanding rhetorical device by our Paul is also found in other N.T. scriptures.
1. He admitted he did so writing Titus, quoting Epimenides of Crete (Titus 1:12-13).
 2. He did not admit doing so when possibly quoting Menander's axiom (I Cor 15:33).
 3. For more about Paul using such sources ... <https://carm.org/did-paul-quote-pagan-philosophers>.
 4. Be careful about stringing verses together without thorough explanation, for such creates sound of words without great value and the connections are missed by most.
 5. Yes, Paul strung verses together at times, but they were tightly related to his context.
- F. The fundamental basics of our religion are known by all men but obeyed by none at all.

29 Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

- A. By natural truth admitted by their poets, Paul again argued for God as infinite Creator.
- B. Paul rebuked Athenian thinking that idols or temples, even if beautiful, were correct.
- C. If we are the offspring of God, then He is a personal Supreme Being and knowable.

30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

- A. Again Paul identified idolatry as ignorance by the obvious nature of God (Acts 17:23).
 1. He did not back off these educated and arrogant men – he charged them as ignorant.
 2. He did not tell stories about fishing with his grandmother or teens in a car wreck.
 3. He has now come to the “invitation” of his preaching, but it is a terrible command.
- B. God had allowed men outside Israel to worship gods of their choice for 4000 years.
 1. He revealed Himself only to Israel with detailed truth of scripture (Ps 147:19-20).
 2. Though God did not generally send prophets to the nations, He judged them for sin.
- C. The kingdom of Jesus Christ was not to be national, but international by the apostles.
 1. They were sent as part of the judgment of this devilish world system (Jn 12:31-32).
 2. They would go forth into all nations, and the gates of hell would lose (Matt 16:18).
 3. They were sent with Holy Ghost power to reprove the world for sin (John 16:8-11).
 4. Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem for power to witness in all the earth (Acts 1:8).
 5. Though obscure Jews, they soon turned the world upside down with truth (Ac 17:6).
 6. The great mystery of godliness is worldwide preaching (I Tim 3:16; Rom 16:25-27).

- D. The command to repent does not imply or require the ability of freewill to thus repent.
 1. Men are without excuse not by freewill but by received revelation (Rom 1:18-23).
 2. Man is dead in sin by choice, though his intellect does grasp an eternal, creator God.
 3. The dead part of man is not his intellect, but rather his heart and motives are corrupt.
 4. God revealed Himself by creation, providence, conscience, apostles, scripture, etc.
 5. For much more about depravity ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/total-depravity.pdf>.
- E. The command to repent brought by the apostles to the world was based on a simple fact.
 1. God would judge all men in the future, which Paul preached to Felix (Acts 24:25).
 2. This was nothing new, for all nations had heard of it from Solomon (Eccl 12:13-14).
 3. Do not think no one knew Solomon or his conclusion about life (I Kings 4:29-34).
- F. Do you repent? Do you understand this God? Head knowledge is absolutely worthless!
- G. Are you living in light of eternal judgment, or are you going through Christian motions?

31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

- A. This God that appointed and determined all things of life has planned more (Acts 17:26).
 1. There is a day coming – a specific point in time – when God will judge all mankind.
 2. Jesus will be Judged (Matt 25:31-32; 28:18; John 5:22-23,26-27; Acts 10:42; Rom 2:16; 14:10-12; II Cor 5:9-11; II Thess 1:7-10; II Tim 4:1; I Pet 4:5; Rev 20:11-15).
 3. The standard will be righteousness – as defined by God in conscience, scripture, etc.
- B. How is Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead assurance that He will judge all men?
 1. Paul declared arrogant Athenians should repent to Jehovah. For why? Resurrection!
 2. The gospel declares the wrath of God (Rom 1:18), but the resurrection guarantees it.
 3. Resurrection is contrary to knowledge of life just like eternal judgment is contrary.
 4. Resurrection (and ascension) put Jesus in heaven as God's Son with power (Ro 1:4).
 5. Jesus had declared He would judge the world, and His resurrection confirmed Him.
 6. Jesus was God's Son, so Jesus being alive again means sure vengeance on evil men.
 7. Jesus is not only resurrected, but seated with exalted power in heaven (Phil 2:9-11).
 8. The destruction of Jerusalem, the worst tribulation of all time, is a precursor of pain.
- C. How much more Paul might have said about Jesus, we do not know. This is sufficient.
 1. What religion is even close to the true and living God and His Son the Judge of all?
 2. What religion is even close to God ordaining a Man and resurrecting a Man to judge?
 3. These men were introduced to a motherlode of truth in brief, but who would repent?
- D. For more ... *Judgment Day of Christ* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/judgment-seat-of-christ.pdf>.
- E. For more ... *Warnings about Hell* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/warnings-about-hell.pdf>.

32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.

- A. Some are cut to the heart and mock, like against Peter after Pentecost (Acts 5:33; 7:54).
 1. They mock, because they cannot refute the evidence produced for our gospel truth.

2. Consider it an honor when you are mocked, for they did so to Paul (Matt 5:10-12).
- B. Some like Felix and Agrippa thought it possible, but postponed their crucial repentance.
 1. Conviction is rare and brief – never waste it – but go immediately to fulfill its call.
 2. David taught wisely that haste, ordinarily wrong, is wonderful for truth (Ps 119:160).
- C. If not for the grace of God to open the hearts and ears of men, none will ever believe.
- D. Do you hear today? Do you believe today? Then you should repent of every evil deed.
- E. Paul’s conclusion for your life is same as Solomon’s 1000 years earlier (Ec 12:13-14).

33 So Paul departed from among them.

- A. They had the greatest privilege possible, but education and peers were great handicaps.
- B. Everyone that mocked will give an account for it; everyone that delayed will be mocked.
- C. Opportunities to obey only last a short season before closed (Prov 29:1; Rev 2:21-22).

34 Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed: among the which was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

- A. God’s grace was present with Paul, so certain men, and a woman, and others believed.
 1. They agreed with Paul’s discourse and attached themselves to this eloquent stranger.
 2. They believed – the character of Jehovah, their duty to repent, and the honor of Jesus.
- B. Dionysius the Areopagite was of some importance there, maybe a judge or the judge.
- C. Damaris was female, honoring Athens, confirming Christ (Gal 3:28), exhorting women.
- D. There are historical records of a church there, some notable members, and their works.

Conclusion:

1. God recently sent us a reminder of inspired philosophy from Solomon that trumps all worldly ideas.
2. Philosophers of Athens and Greece, though nearly deified, were superstitious and ignorant idolaters.
3. We Bible Christians never have to back down from anyone, for we have the truth, and they do not.
4. God then moved us to study the sacraments of the RCC, which is the world’s largest religious body.
5. Though using good words and fair speeches about Jesus, they are superstitious and ignorant idolaters.
6. We Bible Christians should not consider any of their claims possible, for we have the truth they hate.
7. Paul showed us both the superiority and integrity of the gospel in both form and content at Mars’ Hill.
8. Superstition ... to creation ... providence ... knowability ... repentance ... judgment ... Jesus Christ.
9. However, we must personally close with Paul by Luke’s record to repent and follow Jesus more fully.
10. We named our website appropriately, based on Romans 3:4, Let God be true, but every man a liar.

For Further Study:

1. The outline of inspired philosophy ... *Solomon’s Ecclesiastes* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/ecclesiastes-book-format.pdf>.
2. The refutation of the superstition of the RCC ... *Seven Sacraments* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/seven-sacraments-slides.pdf>.
3. The sermon series outline ... *Why I Believe the Bible* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/bible/scripture/why-i-believe-the-bible.php>.
4. The sermon series (slides) ... *Great Mystery of Godliness* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/mystery-of-godliness-powerpoint.pdf>.
5. The sermon series (outline) ... *Great Mystery of Godliness* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/mystery-of-godliness.pdf>.
6. The Bible study in slides ... *The Logic of Faith* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/reasoning-in-the-scriptures.pdf>.
7. Jesus’ charge to the apostles to reprove ... *John 16:8-11* ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/john-sixteen.pdf>.