

**Sunday Morning**

**March 10, 2019**

*The Mars' Hill Approach to Soulwinning*

**Text – Acts 17:14 - 34**

**Congregational Meeting – Acts 17:14 - 17**

### **Introduction**

Explain the background story to Paul's ministry in Athens.

Paul and Barnabas started out in Antioch.

They travelled through Syria and Cilicia confirming the churches.

Next, they went to Derbe and Lystra, which are in the region known as Galatia.

At Lystra, they picked up Timothy who would travel with them.

They continued through Galatia and Phrygia, and intended to stop in churches in Asia, but were forbidden of the Holy Ghost.

They next went to Mysia, and intended to go northeast into Bythinia, but once again the Holy Spirit closed the door.

They continued travelling westward, and ended up at Troas, where two things happened:

- 1 Paul saw a vision of a man in Macedonia that was calling for help.
- 2 They met up with Luke, (Acts 16:10) who travelled with them into Macedonia.

They sailed across the Aegean Sea, stopping for the night at the island of Samothracia, and then on to Neapolis. From Neapolis they travelled inland to Philippi, which was "the chief city" of that part of Macedonia.

There they went to a prayer meeting, and preached the gospel to Lydia, a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira. She was gloriously saved along with the rest of her household, and Paul had the privilege of baptizing her whole family. Paul and his companions lodged with Lydia.

Next, we find Paul incarcerated in the jail at Philippi because he had cast a devil out of a woman that was "possessed with a spirit of divination". She was a "soothsayer", or fortuneteller that had made some businessmen in town a lot of money. They trumped up charges against Paul and Silas, and had them thrown into the jail.

After being beaten, and while being incarcerated, an earthquake occurred which opened all of the doors of the prison. However, neither Paul nor any of the other prisoners attempted to escape. The jailor was so moved by the testimony of these men that he also trusted Christ as His savior; and he, along with his household were also baptized.

From there, Paul, Silas, and Timothy (not Luke) travelled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, and eventually stopped in Thessalonica, seemingly because there was a synagogue there.



## Transition

The thesis of this message is to point out that the Apostle Paul used a different approach to soulwinning while he was in the city of Athens than he had previously used when ministry in other places. If you are going to be effective in sharing your faith with different types of people, you are going to have to learn to employ different methods in articulating the claims of Christianity.

### I In Thessalonica and Berea, Paul reasoned with the Scriptures. (Acts 17:1 – 14)

The word, “reasoned,” used in v. 2 is the word, “διαλέγομαι” (*dialogomai*), which is the word that we get our English word “dialogue.” It means to argue, to reason, or even to dispute.

In Thessalonica and Berea Paul was reasoning out of the Scriptures, which means that he took the Old Testament Scriptures and explained them to a people who knew the Scriptures and believed that they were the Word of God.

Notice, in Thessalonica, that Paul went to the synagogue (v. 1) on the sabbath days (v. 2)

His argument to the Jews at Thessalonica is found in v. 3:

*"Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ." (Acts 17:3)*

Notice, in Berea, Paul also went to the synagogue. (v. 10) The Bereans were said to be more honourable than the people of Thessalonica because they "searched the Scriptures" in order to see that what Paul was saying was true.

But, in both Berea and in Thessalonica, Paul's main audience were people who believed the Scriptures. However, there were also "Greeks" who were saved both in Thessalonica (v. 4) and in Berea. (v. 12) These "Greeks," however were probably Greeks that had previously converted to Judaism.

**Practical Point** – With people who believe the Bible is the Word of God, we only have to prove the principles of salvation with an internal argument. In other words, we don't have to present any reasoning outside of the Scriptures, because the people we are speaking to already believe the Bible to be true.

You will never go wrong using the Scriptures:

*"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Rom 10:17)*

*"So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." (Isa 55:11)*

*"Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29)*

*"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Heb 4:12)*

In Thessalonica and Berea, Paul used the Old Testament Scriptures to convince a primarily Jewish audience that Jesus is God.

However, there will also be times in a world that is becoming increasingly godless, and ignorant of the Scriptures that we will also have to use other arguments, or forms of reasoning, in order to convince people of our claims that Jesus is God.

## **II In Athens, Paul Disputed Without Using the Scripture (vs. 15 – 34)**

The first thing that I want to point out from this passage is the Paul was stirred in his spirit when he saw the lost condition of the people of Athens.

Practical Point – We ought to be stirred into action as well when we look at the lost condition of America.

The Scripture states that Paul was “stirred in him”, because the city was “wholly given to idolatry”. The word used for “stirred” means to provoke or to stimulate; but it can also mean to irritate or make angry. Paul, no doubt was troubled by the fact that this city of 250,000 people was so steeped in idolatry.

Athens was *the most celebrated city of the ancient world* [Easton Bible Dictionary], and the seat of Greek culture, literature, art, and science; and even though she was no longer the capitol of the world when Paul visited her, she was an extremely important city, even while under the authority of Rome.

Apparently, Paul was not exaggerating when he spoke of the idolatry in Athens. It was a sarcastic saying of the Roman satirist that it was "easier to find a god at Athens than a man." [Easton Bible Dictionary]

Notice the word, “dispute,” in v. 17. It is the same word as “reasoned” back in v. 2. (διαλέγομαι - *dialegomai*) At first, he is in the synagogue disputing with Jews and with the devout persons, which were most likely Greek converts to Judaism. Notice, however, that Paul is also disputing in the markets, perhaps with Greeks who were not converts to Judaism.

In v. 18, Paul has an encounter with Greek philosophers who are curious about what he is teaching. They called him a “babbler,” which literally has the idea of a bird picking up seed, and then dropping it somewhere else. What they were saying was that Paul was merely spitting out some strange ideas that he had picked up elsewhere.

The two groups that Paul encountered were the Stoics and the Epicureans.

The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus, had an “eat, drink, and be merry” philosophy. They believed that nothing was wrong. If it feels good, do it.

The Stoicks were followers of Zeno, and were pantheistic (one with nature). They were a very reserved, moral people.

The Stoicks tended to deny the flesh, whereas the Epicureans lived to excess, and satisfied every sensual and carnal appetite anyway they could.

They bring Paul to Areopagus (or Mars Hill) so that he could speak to them.

This hill belonged to (Ares) Mars and was called Mar's Hill; so called, because, as the story went, Mars, having slain Halirrhothius, son of Neptune, for the attempted violation of his daughter Alicippe, was tried for the murder here before twelve gods as judges. This place was the location where the judges convened who, by appointment of Solon, had

jurisdiction of capital offences, (as wilful murder, arson, poisoning, malicious wounding, and breach of established religious usages). The court itself was called Areopagus from the place where it sat, also "Areum judicium" an "curia". To that hill the apostle Paul was not led to defend himself before judges, but that he might set forth his opinions on divine subjects to a greater multitude of people, flocking together there and eager to hear something new. (BLB)

Areopagus also referred to a group of philosophers that met on the hill. This would consist of the culturally elite of the city. It apparently was a "members only" group.

Notice in v. 21 that this group prided themselves in their "open-mindedness" They were always looking for something new. This was a liberal crowd. These people didn't do anything; they just talked about it. This is like the crowd at the universities today. They don't produce anything, they just critique those who do.

Notice Paul's message beginning in v. 22. He is not using the Scriptures. He is using philosophy. He is reasoning with them without using the Scriptures. Everything he says is Scriptural, but he is not directly referring to the Bible.

Notice in v. 23 – Paul's reference to the "Unknown God"

The historical account of Epimenides himself would also tie in nicely with presenting Christ to the Greeks for the first time. You see in the 6th century B.C., when the poet Epimenides lived, there was a plague which went throughout all Greece. The Greeks thought that they must have offended one of their gods, so they began offering sacrifices on altars to all their various false gods. When nothing worked they figured there must be a God who they didn't know about whom they must somehow appease. So Epimenides came up with a plan. He released hungry sheep into the countryside and instructed men to follow the sheep to see where they would lie down. He believed that since hungry sheep would not naturally lie down but continue to graze, if the sheep were to lie down it would be a sign from God that this place was sacred. At each spot, where the sheep tired and layed down, the Athenians built an altar and sacrificed the sheep on it. Afterward it is believed the plague stopped which they attributed to this unknown God accepting the sacrifice. ([www.biblehistory.net](http://www.biblehistory.net))

Paul presented God as their Creator. (Acts 17:24 – 28) Modern day philosophers refer to this as the cosmological argument. The argument for God's existence based upon the fact that something had to create this world that we live in. The universe is not eternal, it had a beginning – anything that has a beginning must have a cause. The cause of the universe is God.

Another good philosophical arguments for God's existence are the teleological argument, which

points to the intricacies and evidences of design in the world. (Illustrate – Paley’s watch) A third argument for God’s existence is the moral argument. There is a universal, objective standard for morality among civilized people. Where did that come from? God.

C. S. Lewis articulated this moral argument:

1. There must be a universal moral law, or else: (a) Moral disagreements would make no sense, as we all assume they do. (b) All moral criticisms would be meaningless (e.g., “The Nazis were wrong.”). (c) It is unnecessary to keep promises or treaties, as we all assume that it is. (d) We would not make excuses for breaking the moral law, as we all do.

2. But a universal moral law requires a universal Moral Law Giver, since the Source of it: (a) Gives moral commands (as lawgivers do). (b) Is interested in our behavior (as moral persons are).

3. Further, this universal Moral Law Giver must be absolutely good: (a) Otherwise all moral effort would be futile in the long run, since we could be sacrificing our lives for what is not ultimately right. (b) The source of all good must be absolutely good, since the standard of all good must be completely good.

4. Therefore, there must be an absolutely good Moral Law Giver.<sup>1</sup>

These arguments are all “external” arguments – meaning arguments outside of the Scripture to prove God’s existence. It is difficult to argue from the Scripture with someone who does not believe the Scriptures. We have to first convince them that God exists, and then we have to present evidences and arguments that support the reliability of the Bible.

Paul also quotes from Greek philosophers:

v. 28 - *“For in him we live, and move, and have our being.”* This was a quote from Epimenides.

*“They fashioned a tomb for thee. O holy and high one.. . . But thou art not dead, thou livest and abidest forever. For in thee we live and move and have our being.”*  
([www.biblehistory.com](http://www.biblehistory.com))

*“For we are also his offspring”* – quote from Aratus, but Aratus was referring to Zeus, not Jehovah God. Paul was not claiming that everyone is a child of God, but rather that we all descended from Adam who was the “son of God” according to Luke’s gospel.

It is clear that Paul was trying to reason with these very educated, and cultured men with reasoning. He quoted from their philosophers and poets. He was trying to present an argument

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<sup>1</sup> Geisler, N. L. (1999). *Moral Argument for God*. In *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* (p. 500). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

based upon reason.

## Conclusion

The results of Paul's apologetic approach to preaching Christ to the people of Athens was that some were saved, including an Areopagite, named Dionysius, and a woman, named Damaris.

The Bible states:

*"Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."* (Luke 15:10)

Though Paul's reasoning without the Scriptures did not produce a great church, it did produce a few converts.

Why was Paul not able to get a church started in Athens:

- 1 Possibly, because he was alone. Jesus sent his disciples out two by two. Missionaries are often more successful and less discouraged when they go out in teams.
- 2 Possibly, because the people he was ministering to had absolutely no foundation prior to Paul's coming.

Illustration – Missionaries who minister to people who have no knowledge of the Scriptures often have to begin with Creation and spend sometimes many years before they can begin to see fruit.

- 3 Possibly, it is because these people were very educated and also steeped in pagan and worldly philosophies that they were not very receptive to what Paul was teaching them.

*"And the common people heard him gladly."* (Mark 12:37)

Practical Points:

- 1 If you want to win people to Christ, you are going to first have to learn the Scriptural principles regarding salvation.
- 2 But, you will also have to learn to intelligently argue your faith with people who do not believe the Scriptures. You need to learn some external arguments as to existence of God. You should also be able to produce some external evidence that support the reliability of the Scriptures. (i.e. the historical accuracy of the Scriptures; the prophetic accuracies of the Scriptures)
- 3 Always use the Scripture along with the eternal arguments, because God's word has a miraculous way of breaking through when all arguments fail. (Bob Gray illustration – "He that hath the son hath life...")