

ACTS 17: THE GOSPEL ON TRIAL

Last week we read about Paul being beaten and imprisoned without due process. He then turned the tables on the magistrates by asserting that he was a Roman citizen. This gave him some space to work. As we pick up the story this week, Paul and company head West on the Egnatian Way, the main road running East and West across Northern Macedonia. (Modern day mainland Greece.) I wonder if Paul is thinking that he will eventually reach Rome, as this would be the way to eventually get there, given his location. At any rate, things don't work out that way and a whole other set of circumstances will move him South, eventually to Athens, the cultural center of Macedonia, (Greece) the epicenter of Greek philosophy – the place from whence Socrates, Plato and Aristotle once taught. It must have seemed a daunting task, but as usual, Paul was up for it.

1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and

demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. 5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. 7 Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus.” 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. 9 So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue for 3 sabbaths. So, he was in town for 3 weeks. And he had many converts, once again including many women from the upper class.

Class stratigraphy in that day. (A few rich and majority poor, with a few sprinkled in the middle, but no middle class as we know in America today.)

But once again zeal took over with some of the Jews who weren't persuaded by his teaching. They got some locals to stir up a riot. (Irony: zealous Jews using Gentiles to do their dirty work.)

They besieged the house of Jason, and when they couldn't find Paul, they dragged Jason out of the house.

Let's look at what they said.

"Those who have turned the world upside down." The reputation of Paul and his company had preceded them. Paul was preaching an inversion.

"... and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus."

Paul's Gospel consistently has more than what we commonly think. Jesus announced a kingdom and Peter, as well as Paul, in their sermons harp on this point.

If "Say this prayer..." was all they were saying, it wouldn't have upset the Gentiles. And if they were talking about a distant king/ kingdom in the future, that wouldn't have brought the house

down either. But they're preaching a new king, there and then – (here and now). That's what gets them in trouble with the Gentiles.

And the fact that Jesus is the King (Messiah) and then died and rose from the dead, gets them in trouble with the Jews.

Keep in mind that the Jews would have been worried about their religious exemption. (explain) The point is that the Gospel they are proclaiming is not the watered-down partial Gospel we have here today.

Eventually Jason was released, and we find that Paul and Company are on already on the road.

10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. 13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas

and Timothy remained there. 15 So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Paul and co. are shuffled off down the road and actually taken a little way off the beaten path, to Berea. They went into the synagogue, where these people were more open-minded than the prior group. And the people listened, then searched the scriptures to check out what Paul was saying. Awesome!

Many Jews and God-fearers, many of whom were once again prominent Gentile women. We see more and more women coming into the church and they actually did a great deal in the early church.

But the crowd from Thessalonica found them and started up more trouble, so Paul was sent to the coast, put on a ship and sailed to Athens -into the heart of pagan philosophy and religion. Silas and Timothy would arrive later.

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. 17 Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to

be there. 18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? 20 For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." 21 For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

Paul grieved while waiting. Goes to the synagogue and the agora. Reasons with whomever will listen.

18 Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we

know what this new doctrine is of which you speak?

What is going on here?

Epicureans – Philosophers who believed the gods were distant and didn't concern themselves with what went on in the earth. A sort of deism. Mostly rich. So how do things happen as they do? Atoms bind together and/ or bounce off each other and things happen, new life is created. The basis of evolutionary theory. God/ gods are removed from the mix.

Stoics – Pantheists who believed god was in everything and everything was in god. This is just the way things are. Nothing much will change. If you didn't like the way things were going, you were welcome to commit suicide and leave.

Neither group was too concerned with the afterlife.

The academy – academics who tended to be agnostic. (The unknown god) keep things going as they are.

So, you have the Stoics who say all is one, the Epicureans who say the gods are distant and don't concern themselves with humans or their affairs and the academics who say we can't be

sure, but we will keep things going as they are just in case.

The common people (like today) tended to muddle these things together without giving much deep thought to any of it.

Paul speaks of Jesus and the resurrection, (anastasis – a feminine noun linked to goddesses.

They say this, “word-scatterer” seems to be preaching foreign divinities, (plural – Jesus and anastasis.) Socrates was executed for the very same thing. And this is why Paul is then taken to the Areopagus – the local court. (Not a coffee shop)

Image of the Areopagus

The areopagus was supposedly established by Apollo as a court, whose charter specifically stated that when a man’s blood was spilt, that was the end. There was no resurrection. This is diametrically opposed to what Paul is preaching. We have here in Acts, just a summary of Paul’s case.

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 for as I was passing through and

***considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:
TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.***

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: 24 God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. 26 And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 27 so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

Image of the Acropolis

Addresses the academics and their agnosticism by pointing to the unknown God. Does not dwell in temples – probably pointing to the Acropolis and all its temples. He isn't worshipped with our hands, as though He needs anything, since He created all things.

Pre-appointed times and dwellings. (DT. 32)
God wants men to search for Him, though He isn't far from any of us.

He has confronted the Epicureans – God is not distant and He wants to know each of us. He is involved with things on earth.

Now Paul quotes two of their poets.

Epimenides, v. 28a; (6th century BC) and Aratus, v. 28b; 3rd century BC.

28 for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

Yes, in him we move and find our being, but there is more to it than that.

To the stoics he says, "Yes, God is in us, but not in the way you think. He is present, He is all around us, but God is not simply the divine force who is in us, God is the creator who is distinct from the world. He is above all creation, (a nod to the Epicureans) God is there, wanting to be found, but He isn't just a force within nature.

29 Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is

like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

If we are the imagers of God, then see that we aren't stone. We are living, moving, acting, effecting, just as the one true God!

Since we are the offspring of God, we ought not think that we, as imagers of God, should worship the living God with Gold, stone, or something shaped by man's hands. This also addresses the academics. God can be known. In fact, He wants to be known and bring all of humanity back to Him. There is no reason for your agnosticism, this is the truth of who God is!

30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

But now Paul says that there is a judgment, (God is involved in the world's affairs) and although there was a time when he overlooked ignorance, there is a time when he will judge

the world in righteousness by Jesus. And He has given us all assurance of His, (Jesus) legitimacy, through the fact that He has risen from the dead.

The resurrection was then, and always has been the greatest stumbling block to both Jew and Gentile alike. But Paul stands fast on that point. This is what makes all the difference and separates Jesus from any other religious systems.

So, what became of the Gospel on trial?

32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." 33 So Paul departed from among them. 34 However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul wasn't sentenced to death as was Socrates. They agreed to hear him again. But one of those on the court believed. And an Athenian woman also believed. And it was at that time that Paul chose to leave. Exactly why, we may never know. The Gospel, as laid out by Paul, made it through the court system of Athens.

But Paul had sown a seed. God doesn't get in a hurry.

Jesus' parable about the tiny seed that grows into a great tree.

Paul reaches out to them wherever they are. He finds common ground for a toe – hold, a beach head in order to build a bridge. This is the only way to start a dialogue – to be heard.

This bridge is definitely longer and harder to build than the one he builds for the Jews, but he does it, nevertheless.

We must build bridges. We must set the time bomb, (as Paul did in the book of Philemon, regarding slavery.)