

A REASONABLE FAITH**Acts 17:16-34**

Intro: When I took my 2012 Sabbatical, the first leg of my journey was the Western Indian State of Goa. My host, Dan Deyhle, with his wife, Karen, were the pioneering Brethren in Christ missionaries in that region. Part of my visit there involved contacts with our Brethren in Christ ministries in that area and also in the State of Karnataka to the east in the central part of the Indian subcontinent. A highlight of my travels as I went to Karnataka was a visit to the ancient city of Hampi.

Hampi was almost exotic for me. Populated, first by Hindus, and then conquered by a Muslim sultan who brought Islamic rule to the region for several hundred years after which it reverted to Hindu dominance where it remains. It is a fascinating place full of monkey and elephant god statues. There is even an elephant stable where a sacred elephant is kept and worshipped. Everywhere, and I mean EVERYWHERE, there are ornate and fantastic reliefs, carved pillars and statues. It is an understatement that Hampi oozes religion. But it was distressing to me in that it was all tremendously false and empty religion.

I know for some people Hampi was exciting, as they went there to seek themselves. There were a few hippie communes on the other side of the river and the constant pall of dust or smoke or a combination of the two, was over both sides of the river. I remember wondering if the cloud was, perhaps, marijuana smoke. The truth is, to the people who carved all those statues and pursued all that religious fervor as they worshipped the millions of gods that comprise Hinduism, all of this was serious business. In fact, it WAS business. Inside every temple were often bizarre looking priests who would do some kind of ritual for you but always at a price. Frankly, it all gave me the creeps. It probably wasn't a good response, and I'm fairly certain that I kept it to myself. That is, I didn't probably didn't look like I was creeped out. But inside my spirit was crawling.

Why was my spirit unsettled? Well, there was a heavy spirit of oppression over the entire place. Actually, I found that to be true of all my experience in India. I admit that is in part owing my own naivete and that I am still a naïve Brethren in Christ boy at heart. But a lot of it was the fact that my spirit is stirred when I am in the presence of evil.

I believe that Athens was a similar place to the apostle Paul.

It was a place of deep culture. There was a who's who? list of people who were native or adopted Athenians. You are probably familiar with names like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus, just to name a few. These were all famous philosophers and thinkers who either were from Athens or came to call Athens home. It was also the birthplace of democracy and, interestingly, the Roman Empire had given Athens amazingly free-range to practice their own government and promulgate their own philosophy and religion. In other words, there was a good bit of freedom to be who they were.

I am still, in many ways, a naïve Brethren in Christ boy, even at the age of 69. And because of that things still shock me. I think Paul was similar. Even with his extensive travels and his deep learning of not only Jewish belief but also pagan teaching, he was still a naïve Jewish boy. Because of that, I believe that, as Paul arrived in Athens, it gave him the creeps in much the same way that Hampi affected me.

Paul was never one to miss a chance. He had been dropped off in Athens by his colleagues after running into opposition in various places that you hopefully read about as you read the opening verses of Acts 17 and you know that Jewish troublemakers had followed him everywhere he went. Now, he ends up in a completely unJewish situation, and maybe he is out of his comfort zone, but, true to form, he's relying on the Holy Spirit. So rather than going incognito in the city of Athens, Paul refuses to take a vacation from the Gospel.

My plan for the remainder of this talk, which I'm endeavoring to keep shorter since I understand some are concerned that my sermons have been too long, is to discuss how, Paul addressed people who had little or no knowledge of the one true God.

To do that, I need to begin with a description of the philosophical groups known as the Stoics and the Epicureans. These were the two main influences that Paul was coming up against as he shared Jesus Christ with the people of Athens who were known for being extremely philosophical and curious. This is evident in verses 19-20. Paul has been taken to the area of the city where the Areopagus met and they say to him, *"May we know what this new teaching is that you're presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean."* And then Luke adds this descriptive sentence in verse 20,

Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who live there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

One could say that they were open-minded since they were curious about what Paul had to say. But they weren't, really – they were skeptical at best.

Now back to who these philosophical groups were. Let me read F. F. Bruce's description of them from his commentary – it's long even though I've edited it a bit, but it's very helpful:

"The Stoics, claimed the Cypriot, Zeno, as their founder. Their system aimed at living consistently with nature, and in practice. They lay great emphasis on the primacy of the rational faculty in humanity, and on individual self-sufficiency. In theology they were essentially pantheistic (basically the belief that the universe and God are the same), with God being regarded as the world-soul. Their belief in a cosmopolis or world state in which all truly free souls had equal citizen rights helped to break down national and clash distinctions. At its best was marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty. It commended suicide as an honorable means of escape from a life that could no longer be sustained with dignity.

The Epicurean School, founded by Epicurus, based its ethical theory on the atomic physics of Democritus and presented pleasure as being the chief end in life, the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility, free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears (including in particular the fear of death). It did not deny the existence of gods but maintained that they took no interest in the life of men and women."

Bruce goes on to say Stoicism and Epicureanism “. . . represented alternative attempts in pre-Christian paganism to come to terms with life, especially in times of uncertainty and hardship; post-Christian paganism has never been able to devise anything appreciably better. But Stoics and Epicureans alike, much as they might differ from each other, agreed, at least on this: that the newfangled message brought by this Jew of Tarsus was not one that could appeal to reasonable people.”

What Paul then attempted to do then, was to use reason along with some great truth to bring the truth of Jesus Christ to the people of Athens. In Paul's mind it was a truly reasonable faith.

Paul's listeners gave him the platform and sat back to listen to his philosophy and what he presented was, essentially, a three-point sermon.

The introduction was **The Unknown God**

His main point was **There is ONLY One True God.**

And then Paul's conclusion was, now that you know about the one true God. **Turn to God.**

Using that outline we'll talk about Paul's message to his skeptical audience.

First of all, we know, and Paul certainly knew, who God was. But now, he was going to reveal to his listeners who the unknown God was he had seen inscribed in a pagan altar.

This is referring to our text in verse 16, which recounts how, as Paul walked through Athens, looking at the idols everywhere, his spirit was provoked – but one of those altars had caught his eye, one with the inscription:

“To the unknown God.” Paul's simple plan the, is to proclaim this very God so that he's no longer unknown. When you see a lack of belief is your spirit provoked? What does it take to break your heart about the lost people around you? My experience in India was definitely a time when my soul was provoked at the lostness of souls. But as I've looked at this passage today, I've confronted myself with the difficult realization that I have people all around me every day – right here where I live – who's souls are as lost as any Hindu monkey god worshipper.

Paul's heart was certainly broken by the idols all around him. But have you ever thought that we have idols all around us too. People worship sports, celebrity, prosperity, politics, physical beauty, and staying young just to name a few. In fact, people can even make idols of their children. Here is truth: anything that crowds God out in your life is an idol.

Let me ask again: What provokes your soul?

Back to our text. Albert Winn says this. *“To unknown gods, that is, to any other gods who might exist and whom men ought to avoid offending. Paul's point is that, for all their gods, the Athenians have not known the one true God.”* In verse 24:27, he makes the following points about the true God: #1) *He created all things;* #2) *He does not live in temples made by men;* #3) *Men do not provide for God's wants, but he for theirs;* and #4) *He is not the property of one nation, but has created all nations from a single stock, that all may seek him.*

In all the other sermons that we've heard from Paul up to this point in our study of Acts, Paul has relied on the Old Testament because he was speaking to people who were intimately, or at least, relatively familiar with Jewish scripture. Now, here in Athens, Paul has to draw on other things. These people have no idea what his Jewish religion is all about, so Paul has to adapt the message to them. But notice he didn't mince words. David Guzik says that *Paul didn't preach a soft gospel*. Instead, he boldly confronted the wrong ideas the Athenians had about God, and confronted them with the reality of coming judgment for all humankind.

We do well to do the same. We must not soft pedal the Good News, however, but at the same time, we need to make it clear to people who need Jesus. People don't know our terminology – so it's important we do not use Christianese. I also question the value and effectiveness of bumper stickers that make a statement about Jesus. That's a small space and maybe fleeting and might only raise unanswered questions. I really appreciate the faithfulness and the sacrifice of people who put up billboards making reference to scripture. But to a culture that is increasingly non-Christian, I question the value of putting up things that are completely foreign to the people who will be reading them. Instead of using our bumper stickers or our bulletin boards or mysterious notations on Facebook, maybe we need to be living Jesus in front of people. Maybe we should be loving them until they ask us why – and then we can carefully explain exactly who he is and why we need him.

We know that Paul's audience was arrogant and skeptical. They had already called him a babbler even before they took him before the court to hear his teaching. They also felt that their Greek philosophy was far superior to anything this country bumpkin might come up with. But that didn't discourage Paul, he moved on to . . .

The One True God

Paul wasn't cowed by their arrogance. Instead, he moved on courageously. He knew that he had the truth and so he was determined to share it with them. So instead of putting down their belief system, he complimented them in a way for their religiosity. He acknowledged that they were seekers. He also acknowledged that they didn't want to make any of the gods mad, not even the ones that they weren't sure about.

Paul points out that there is only one God who can be known, and he's the one that made the world and everything in it. He's the Lord of heaven and Earth, and he doesn't live in temples full of idols. The one true God isn't some image fashioned out of wood or marble or metal. No, he is a living and eternal God who is served by humans. He's the one who gives all humankind life and breath and everything else for that matter. And this is where he goes into the Good News even though he doesn't call it that. And the message is – though one man (it's Jesus Christ, the son of God though Paul doesn't name him), who was raised from the dead, we can know the one true God.

This is where Paul hit a bit of a brick wall. Athenians believed in gods and they also believed in eternal life, but this idea of being raised from the dead in a bodily resurrection? Now that was difficult for them to swallow. In fact, most of them scoff at this crazy guy and walk away.

Paul's final point, is **TURN TO GOD**.

Now it's interesting, as I mentioned above, that Paul doesn't refer to Jesus by name, but he definitely includes the message of Christ as he points the need for all to repent. There WILL be a day coming when a reckoning will come upon the world. Paul did what he could, with what he had to work with as he courageously confronted the people of Athens. But you'll notice that, as we have seen frequently in Acts, there were not nearly as many converts. Did Paul fail in Athens? Some people think that he did. They believe that he bit off more than it could chew in presenting the gospel to these thoroughly pagan people. But the truth is, some believed. In fact, specific names are mentioned, specifically, Dionysius who was one of those philosophers who regularly met with the Areopagus and also a woman named Damaris. There were others too and so seeds were planted. It's true we have no record of Paul going back to Athens and there's no letter to the Athenians like there is to the Corinthians, Galatians, Thessalonians, Colossians or the Philippian. But the gospel was certainly planted there and eventually there was a growing church.

Guzik says that Paul seemed unable to preach a sermon without focusing on the resurrection of Jesus. This is because, for him, none of the Christian life made sense without the triumph of Jesus's Resurrection. That's the truth. Why change the gospel to make it fit culture. The whole gospel the whole truth and nothing but the truth needs to be presented about Jesus. If you take out part of the Gospel, then it's no longer the gospel. That's what reasonable faith is. It's courageous and it breaks the bread of life to people who are hungry for the Good News.

Amen