

Ps 66; Ac 17:22-31; 1 Pe 3:13-22; Jn 14;15-21

### A Theory of Everything Spiritual

The Apostle Paul had plenty of trouble in his thirty-odd years of teaching and preaching the Good News. He met opposition from Roman authorities, from fellow Christians, from pagans and most of all from the Hebrews who were scattered throughout the Empire. Jews who held to the “old-time religion” hated Paul with an exquisite and deadly hatred. Imagine a personality like Paul’s: the more difficult the task of persuading all these I have mentioned, the more Paul prayed and strategized and came up with means of persuasion. Paul never tired of finding ways to bring the Good News of the Gospel where it hadn’t been heard before.

No movement of the Gospel takes place without the working of the Holy Spirit. Not then, not now. Jesus promised this Advocate, this Companion to ***all who believe in Him***. Jesus said, “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you. I will talk to the Father, and he’ll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can’t take him in because it doesn’t have eyes to see him, doesn’t know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you and will even be *in you!*” (John 14:15-17 MSG) Paul’s ministry team was led and protected and inspired by the blessed Holy Spirit. They could not have accomplished what they did alone.

Paul is in Athens in the passage for today. He has been sent away from the places where there are plots to kill him. So great was the opposition he stirred up in Thessalonica and Berea that he had to leave. He is a tourist in the intellectual center of the \*ANE, waiting for the others. Thinkers from all over the world gathered in Athens to discuss the philosophical theories of the time. Paul is walking around Athens and noticing how many pagan temples there are. There is a temple for every major god and goddess – also temples to lesser deities – perhaps Fortuna or Tyche (casino goddess) – maybe Bacchus or Dionysus (party god). Paul is devastated to see how far from the Creator God Greek culture has wandered. He didn’t just tour the city. No, Paul went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the Gentile God-fearers. He spoke in the marketplace to anybody who would listen. He met Stoic and Epicurean philosophers there in the agora – the marketplace. They wanted to leave the bustle and noise of the food stalls and produce stands and to hear more from this “babbling” who was talking about a Savior and His resurrection.

Maybe Paul was taken to the Areopagus with some force – or maybe he was eager to join these learned people and have a chance to talk in a quieter location. Areopagus means Mars hill – Mars rock. It was a place of judgment. These influential Athenians wanted to judge Paul’s message – whether it was worthwhile and possibly illegal.

The religions of the day were registered with Rome. The state decided which cults were in keeping with the Roman requirement to worship Caesar. Lots of religions were permitted, but the state demanded tribute to the ruler. Christianity was not favored. Judaism was tolerated. In our time we are challenged trying to understand this mixture of state and church. It is alien to our modern values. Athenian patriotism – indeed Roman patriotism was measured by devotion to the god Caesar.

1) Paul doesn’t condemn pagan religion. Rather the shrine to the unknown god becomes a doorway into pagan values and virtues. The apostle takes advantage of their openness to an ***unknown***, and their curiosity to know something new. He introduces them to the Creator God – “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.” (v 24)

2) Paul proclaims God – the one true God. Paul then declares that God is as near as our life, our ability to move and our very being. This God is the giver of the life we experience in our heartbeat, our breath and our self-awareness.

The Epicureans believe in matter and void – therefore this life is all there is of human potential. Stoics believe in matter and reason (logos) – that we have a humanistic goal and purpose.

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3) Paul quotes the Greek poet Aratus, who proclaimed that we are “God’s offspring.” (Phenomena 1-5) Aratus meant that we are the children of Zeus or “divine fire.” Paul adapts the poet’s words to say that we are not far from the Creator God, but intimately near Him.

4) Finally, Paul announces that the righteous judgment of the cosmos will come through a Man shown to be the anointed one – the Messiah Jesus – by His physical resurrection from the dead.

In many ways we live today in a neo-pagan culture in some parts of our world. Where there is faith in God, Paul’s reasoned argument doesn’t seem so forceful. But hearts that are adrift in a sea of self-determination and self-gratification need hope. Paul proposes a new theory of everything – a worldview filled with the glory and mercy of our Creator God.

Imagine for a moment the emptiness of both the Epicurean and the Stoic worldview. The first teaches people to devote themselves to the desires and gratification of appetite. The second teaches people to cultivate disinterest and to rise above all desire and gratification. No grace, no mercy, no glory.

Some on Mars Hill sneered at Paul’s words, but some were intrigued and came down from the hill ready to hear more about this merciful and gracious God. Some believed and became Jesus-followers.

Our human hearts are created to love God. How wonderful that God loves us so much that He sent Jesus to restore our full humanity – to live in true relationship with Him, with ourselves, with one another and with the cosmos. Every spiritual need is fulfilled in our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. This is Paul’s theory of everything! Amen.

\*Ancient Near East

