

Acts 17:23

I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD

The world's largest general science journal reviewed some of the world's toughest questions

- What is the universe made of?
- Is ours the only universe?
- By how long can the human lifespan be extended?

The renowned raiser of questions in the ancient world was Socrates (469-399 B.C.)

- Why be honest?
- What is justice?
- What makes a city great? Are just some of the questions he asked

The science-fiction comedy, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

- Has attained cult status over the last 30 years (through radio, TV, books)
- Arthur Dent, the hero, and his friends search the galaxy
- For the question to the ultimate answer
- They know the answer is 42 – it's just that they don't know the question

The home of the great philosopher Socrates was Athens

- Condemned for not believing in the gods the state believes in
- Socrates was imprisoned and finally died by drinking hemlock

Hundreds of years later, when Paul arrived in the city of Athens

- He was taken to a meeting of the Areopagus – to present his new teaching
- The Athenians and the visitors to Athens spent their time doing nothing
- But talking about and listening to the latest ideas
- Such an audience was challenging for Paul and very different from the synagogue

After preaching at Philippi, Paul journeyed 60 miles southwest on the Via Egnatia

- Passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia on his way to Thessalonica
- The capital of the Roman province of Macedonia (pop. 200,000)
- Here Paul preached in the local synagogue, reasoning, explaining and proving
- 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ' (Acts 17:4)

As had happened on previous occasions, the Jews who did not believe the gospel

- were incensed at the Gentiles' response
- and claimed that Paul and the apostles were disturbing the Pax Romana
- by preaching a *religio illicita* (an illegal religion)
- advocating another king in opposition to Caesar

The result was that Jason and others who had supported Paul were required to pay bail

- to stand guarantee that there would be no repetition of the trouble
- this probably meant that Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica
- and that their friends promised that they would not come back
- Paul later saw this as the work of the enemy saying, 'Satan stopped us' (1 Thess 2:18)
- After visiting Berea with similar results, Paul went to Athens by way of the coast

The allegation that the evangelists are ‘men who have caused trouble all over the world’ (v 6)

- Is something of an overstatement to say the least
- But it teaches us the valuable lesson
- That preaching the gospel is not conducive to peace and quiet
- Often when the gospel is preached, even in churches
- The challenge to people to change their lives is too much for some
- And usually trouble comes from those who reject this challenge
- Paul had to flee from all three Macedonian cities in which he ministered
- And so made his way to Athens, the city of Socrates, the city of questions
- However, Luke’s summary of Paul’s sermon gives us the answers
- But, like *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* we have to search for the questions

We do this by exploring the

CONTEXT

CONTENT

CONVERSIONS

Of this great preaching occasion

I CONTEXT

To escape persecution in Macedonia, Paul has been taken to Athens

- While waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him from Berea
- Paul decides to do a bit of sightseeing
- As a Christian who had been hitherto a strict Jew
- Paul was naturally distressed to see the city full of idols
- Something that was spiritually repulsive to Paul

Such idolatry compelled him to reason with Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue

- And with whoever would listen in the market-place
- Athens was a place where literature, philosophy, science and rhetoric flourished
- And intellectuals from all over the world gathered there
- So that it was home not only to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle
- But also Epicurus and Zeno, and their rival schools of philosophy

Epicurus taught that death is nothing at all to us

- For that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations
- No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but pleasure’s limit is the removal of all pain
- Fear of pain and death can be avoided by knowing the nature of the universe
- The gods took no interest in men

Zeno, who taught in the painted Stoa (colonnade) founded the Stoic school of philosophy

- Zeno taught the importance of living in accord with nature (god in nature/pantheism)
- Simple living through moderation and futility
- That the cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance
- The path to inner peace is extinguishing all desire to affect things beyond our control

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began dispute with Paul

- some of them called him a ‘babblers’ which literally translated means seed-picker
- the nearest translation we might come to is ‘parrot’
- in the sense of just repeating words without understanding
- what is this ‘parrot’ trying to say
- some concluded he was advocating foreign gods
- perhaps mistaking Anastasis (resurrection) for a goddess
- for Paul was preaching about Jesus and Anastasis (resurrection)

The philosophers took Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus (Court of Ares)

- Ares was the Greek god of thunder and war, the Roman equivalent was Mars
- Paul’s appearance here is unlikely to have been informal
- It is more likely that he had to give an account of his teaching
- So that he might be either authorised to speak in the city or censored and silenced

II CONTENT

Unlike his sermons in the synagogue, or to the Jews and God-fearers

- Paul does not begin by referring to Jewish history or quoting the Jewish Scriptures
- The Athenians would not have had any particular interest in those
- Instead he begins with something he has seen in the city

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

(Acts 17:22-23)

This is not so different from the teaching style of Jesus who spoke to

- Galilean fisherman about being fishers of men
- A woman at the well about living water
- a crowd that had just been miraculously fed about the bread of life
- people living in a land of shepherds and sheep about the Good Shepherd

Now Paul, who has pledged to be ‘all things to all men’ for the sake of the gospel

- finds common ground with his hearers
- and seeks to lead them from that common ground
- to accept the person and work of Jesus, God’s plan of salvation for the world

If Paul is to speak about God in the context of many gods, he must explain what God is like

- contrary to the polytheism of the Epicureans or pantheism of the Stoics
- God is the one who has created the world and everything in it
- He is the Lord of heaven and earth but does not live in temples made by hands
- He does not need the frailty of human hands to serve him, as if he needed anything
- He is not an absentee creator but the source of life and breath and everything else
- From his original creation the whole of humanity has come into being

God sovereignty over the world is exercised so that men might seek him and find him

- For he is not far from each one of us
- In support of this teaching, Paul quotes two maxims from Greek poets
- Epimenides and Aratus – no doubt he would not have approved of all they wrote
- But here is some common ground

Despite its form, Paul's address was thoroughly biblical and Christian in its content

- From this we learn the vital lesson
- With nominal Christians we can reason with them from the Bible
- But with those who have no real knowledge or commitment to the Bible
- We have to use other methods – but the Bible message is still uppermost in our minds

The offspring of God are living and moving – creatures with a real being

- Surely it cannot be the case that the creator is gold or silver or stone
- An image made by man's design and skill?
- In the modern idiom we could ask – did God create us or did we create him?

If God is sovereign, why did he allow people to behave as they have done/

- God overlooked such idolatrous ignorance in the past (Rom 3:25)
- Because he is more interested in repentance than judgement
- But it is his command that all people everywhere repent
- For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice
- By the man he has appointed – the uniqueness of that man and his authority
- Is confirmed by this – God has authenticated all this by raising Jesus from the dead

If Paul had established common ground through the altar the UNKNOWN GOD

- And declared the sovereignty of God over the affairs of humanity
- And the holiness and justice of God set against sin and commanding repentance
- Paul's teaching of the resurrection is a bridge too far for the Athenians

The great Athenian playwright Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) wrote

“When the dust has soaked up a man's blood, once he is dead,
there is no resurrection.”

It would have been easier for Paul to have simply affirmed the immortality of the soul

- Many of the Greeks could have readily accepted this
- But Paul's purpose was not to please the crowds but to proclaim the truth
- It had now become a similar situation to the towns of Macedonia
- For the gospel challenges the way people think and the way people live

It is important that we are aware of the context in which we are proclaiming the gospel

- Some sincere Christians scarcely seem to have the vocabulary
- To speak with any others about the Christian faith outside of their sub-culture
- But it is equally important not to compromise the content of the gospel
- Substituting immortality of the soul for the resurrection is not an alternative gospel
- It is no gospel at all – for there is no assurance of victory in Christ

It is also selling the gospel short if we focus on the subjective needs of people

- Instead of the objective realities of God made known in Jesus Christ
- That is, if all our attention is given to the needs of the world and of the individual
- It becomes a man-centred theology – and parts of the message that don't appeal
- Can be conveniently pared away

In recent years, we have added a helpful expression to our vocabulary, 'pre-evangelism'

- Pre-evangelism is communicating with people in a way that they will understand
- Presenting the truth that God exists, is knowable, is sovereign, is holy
- In a bygone age nominal Christians, people who were brought up in Sunday School
- Knew this was what Christians believed and might well have believed it themselves
- Now the context is different – in the world outside we are preaching in Athens
- Not in Jerusalem, that is we have to start from the basics
- But just presenting a belief in God is not enough
- It worries me dreadfully that the testimony of so many people seems to be
- 'I believe in God' – what runs through my mind at that point is, 'so does the devil'
- Believing in God is a start but we are proclaiming the truth of Jesus
- His death and resurrection

At Athens Paul had a new and different kind of evangelistic opportunity

- It was important to speak with respect for the context
- Strident and aggressive methods are simply not biblical
- As Peter wrote in his letter:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.

(1 Peter 3:15–16)

In Paul's sermon at the Areopagus, we find the answers to the great questions

- Without having those questions spelled out to us
- This was the problem of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
- As they searched for the question to the ultimate answer
- Paul speaks of the knowable God, revealed in creation and in Jesus
- Paul speaks of the sovereign God, who is ultimately in control
- Paul speaks of the holy God, who calls all people everywhere to turn to him

From the answers we can work out the questions

Paul so an altar to the UNKNOWN GOD

- Question: is God knowable? Answer, yes – he is supremely revealed in Jesus

Paul proclaimed a sovereign God

- Question: is God in ultimate control? Answer, yes – and he has set a day of justice

Paul proclaimed a holy God

- Question: what is God like? He is holy

If the knowable God is indeed the supreme Lord of creation

- The wisest thing to do is to turn to him, not an optional extra but a commandment

III CONVERSION

I don't hear people talking about conversion much these days, even in church

- This is because, so often, the message of Jesus Christ is presented as a lifestyle choice
- From the supermarket of lifestyle choices
- Some people choose to play golf, others choose to collect stamps
- Some people choose to play football, others choose to dance
- Some people choose a life of wine, women and song
- Others choose a life of prayer and faith – but this is not a lifestyle choice
- But the response to a divine commandment

For the most part, repentance is presented as a new way of living

- But repentance truly begins with a new way of thinking
- As we attempt to answer life's ultimate questions
- Is God knowable? Is God sovereign? What is God like? What does he expect of me?

We should notice that the number of Athenians to respond positively to the message is small

- It seems that the council of the Areopagus were not convinced of the truth
- No action is taken to approve of Paul's right to stay and teach in the city
- The Christian message had made some uneasy, and caused them to sneer
- We certainly hear of no church being established at Athens
- Yet even in the most difficult situations some were converted
- Notably Dionysius and Damaris, probably two quite influential people

Paul's mission at Athens was a tough mission – a mission comparable with ours today

- Despite the fact he did not directly quote the Bible his message is still faithful
- From the culture of the day, Paul agreed with what he could agree with
- He begins with pre-evangelism – but continues by proclaiming Jesus

We go out into a post-Christian society – we must be careful not to take things for granted

- In sharing our faith, we can find things in the culture and people around us to admire
- We need to get close to people, understand them and pray for their salvation

Just because in our society people do not readily build pagan idols or altars

- To gods, known or unknown, does not mean that they no longer search for meaning
- Many people – in all kinds of ways – are looking for the Unknown God
- They are also concerned about an unknown future
- Which explains the huge popularity of astrology and psychic readings
- Such fears give us opportunity to present God as sovereign over history
- Since many people have lost the sense of a holy God and the seriousness of sin
- We must do all we can, especially in worship, to reflect our belief that God is holy
- Becoming all things to all men, so that by all possible means we might save some
- Is God knowable? Is God sovereign? What is God like? What does he expect of me?
- He is knowable. He is sovereign. He is holy, just and merciful – revealed in Jesus
- He commands all people everywhere to repent, how they live and what they believe
- No wonder Paul can sum it all up like this;
- To know Christ and the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10)