

Christian Tradition and Diverse Faith Traditions

(5 of 9)



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Catherine. Acts 17:16-34

Now while Paul was waiting for them [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. And some said, "What would this babbler say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he preached Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for

*'In him we live and move and have our being';
as even some of your poets have said,*

'For we are indeed his offspring.'

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this."³³ So Paul went out from among them.³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Justo. This passage has been variously interpreted in recent generations, in order to support conflicting views of the relationship between Christianity and various religions. For some, it represents Paul's great failure: He tried to deal with philosophers on their own terms and didn't have much success. After this, he foreswore any such method—these interpreters would say—and stuck to the radical character of the gospel which was indeed "foolishness to the Greeks." For others, it represents Paul's "being all things to all people" and a model of missionary method. The truth probably lies somewhere other than with these two extremes.

This passage points to several elements that are critical for the issue of Christianity's relationship to the religious environment of the Graeco-Roman world. Our world is larger—and the character of competing faiths is more complex—but surely in this passage from Acts there may be words for us as well as for the early church that was its first recipient.

Paul was not planning to stop in Athens. Plans had changed because of upheavals caused by Paul's preaching in Thessalonica. So he is in Athens, awaiting his companions. But Paul was, by calling, a missionary. An unemployed missionary is hard to imagine, before the eschaton! In Athens he found work to do, and so he did it.

The situation was different from what he usually encountered. Athens was not an important city any more in a political or economic sense. It retained, however, its rank as an intellectual center. The council that had traditionally met on the Areopagus—Mars' Hill—now regulated the

teaching that went on in the city, which was both philosophic and religious teachings. Their meeting place had moved, but the council was still called the Areopagus.

Catherine. Paul evidently began his time of enforced leisure by walking around the city. He was accustomed to Gentile cities in the Empire, but apparently the quantity of idols in Athens was quite overwhelming. Paul was a Jew, and even growing up outside of Israel had not lessened his dislike of idolatry. Athens seems to have provoked that innate distaste for idols that other cities had not.

The text says that, as a result of his annoyance with all of the idols, he began speaking in the synagogue to both Jews and others who were sympathetic to the synagogue, and that he also preached in the marketplace. He had not been planning a campaign here, but the idols got to him. And so, he went to the synagogue. What is not clear is whether the idols simply made him decide to begin a mission here, even though he was alone and had not planned to do so, or whether he initially went to the synagogue to be with others who would be appalled at the idols and used this as an opening for his mission.

Paul usually began with the synagogue. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity is complex, but the two are clearly related in unique ways. This leads to commonalities as well as to competition and fights. Paul was in Athens, according to Acts, because the Jews in Thessalonika complained to the city authorities about Paul and his companions and pursued

them even to Berea, forcing them to leave there. In some ways, the closer various religious communities are related, the deeper the rivalry and distrust may be. At the same time, the same closeness provides links that may overcome the antipathy. Paul began with the synagogue in Athens—despite all that happened in Thessalonika, and he may have begun there because he anticipated a common heritage that led to being upset at the quantity of idols to be found in Athens.

Justo. The most interesting part of this account, however, is probably Paul's impromptu encounter with Greeks--especially those who maintained no contact with the synagogue. However disturbed he had been, no trace of that shows in his words now. He was, after all, a self-conscious missionary to the Gentiles. Surely, he had been in some similar situations before—perhaps not in the equivalent of a university town—but he had preached to intellectuals who were unacquainted with Judaism or Christianity.

Paul began informally debating with people in the marketplace. The text says that he went there every day and argued with anyone he could find to talk to. In Athens, however, such "teaching" was regulated, and he was clearly preaching something unlike the rest of the teachers in Athens, which included Epicurean and Stoic teachers. He was, therefore, brought to the council of the Areopagus and asked to explain what it was that he was teaching. This may have been a normal procedure to regulate teachers in Athens. At least it provided a forum for Paul. Nor is there any evidence that Paul was in some sort of legal, judicial process. He did, however, have a

great opportunity. What follows in his address is a combination of the monotheistic dislike of idolatry with an awareness of the universality of religious devotion. Paul combines in this speech the difficulties and the possibilities that Christianity has always had in its relationship with other religious faiths.

Catherine. In one sense, Paul's task was made easier because he was not dealing with another strong monotheistic faith in speaking to the Athenians. They were quite accustomed to a multiplicity of gods and varieties of worship. There were many foreigners in Athens, and they were quite expected to bring their gods with them and erect shrines to divinities hitherto unworshipped in Athens. There was some thought that Paul represented some gods—Jesus and Resurrection—that were foreign but not necessarily new.

Everybody has gods. Foreign people have foreign gods. There is a certain "live-and-let-live" character to this attitude that helps cosmopolitan cities continue without undue friction. But that is an attitude that Christianity has never been able to accept. Judaism also had difficulty with it. At least Jews were from a particular country, so their worship could be understood as foreign worship. Christians did not have that rationale. Paul might be foreign as far as Athens was concerned, but the divinity he represented had no native land in the sense that other foreign divinities did. The passage we read the other morning from the *Epistle to Diognetus* shows this very clearly: "Every foreign land is to them [the Christians] as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers." Paul could not simply say: "I bring you the

news of the god we have worshipped in my country." That would have been a complete falsification of the gospel.

We have not totally escaped such a notion, however. We may still assume that those who come from particular parts of the world are of course Christians—or Muslims—or Hindus—or something else. Many are confused by a Muslim in Rhode Island or a Christian in Bangladesh. The idea that "foreign people have foreign gods" makes life a little smoother in our mobile world. But it still presents a problem for the church, as Paul well realized. And so, he began his address.

Justo. Paul began with the words, "men of Athens." The text is quite unambiguous and gender specific. He was speaking to the council, and that was all men. But evidently there were others present and listening, for we find at the conclusion of his speech that a woman named Damaris was among those who were convinced by what he had to say. So, his audience was probably wider than his form of address indicates.

Paul made several points.

The Athenians were very religious. They intended to worship all the divinities they could discover, and they have discovered many. That is why they filled the city with idols. They were also concerned that they might have missed some. In fact, they were probably quite convinced

that they had missed some. That is why they were eager to hear new teachers who came to town, propounding foreign divinities. That is also why they erected an altar to an unknown god—one they had not heard of but who might be important in their lives. They were indeed taking no chances.

Catherine. Paul equated the God whom he served with this unknown god. In some sense, this could be seen as a rhetorical device, a good way to begin his speech, with no particular truth meant by it. But in another sense, Paul probably did mean it. The god or gods whom they may have missed—in fact, all the divinities in the world they have missed—were really to be found in the god whom Paul preached. So were all the divinities whom they had found. The only divinity that there is, is the One whom Paul preached. He could, therefore, with confidence, assume that it was the unknown one of the Athenians. It is this One God who created all things, and who governs the affairs of all peoples and all nations. Since this God is the Lord of all, there is no place for a multiplicity of gods who are responsible for bits and pieces of life or for particular nations.

Justo. Parallel with this universality of the one God is the interconnectedness of humanity. Therefore, though only Jews and Christians may be worshiping this one God knowingly, this God is related to all human beings as the one who created them and who governs their lives. God is related to them, though they are not related to God in a knowing way. This is very significant.

Paul had no sense that he was bringing God to them. He was, indeed, trying to bring to them the knowledge of the reality of the God who was already related to their lives.

Behind Paul's statement that God had "made from one every nation" probably every laid his understanding of Genesis. Regardless of how we deal with the early chapters of Genesis, the statement remains extremely important. We are aware of attempts throughout history to classify different races and nations as more or less human. What is at stake here is the common humanity, the one human race that is prior to any divisions into ethnic diversity. The diversity is important—and there will be a place for that. But the commonality is also essential. The One God created the one human race. The one God is related to that entire humanity and desires that that one humanity be knowingly related to God in return. Paul's message is based on that. Whatever else we say about the multiplicity of religious faiths in our world, we cannot deny that the God whom we worship is related to all humanity, in the traditional cultural cliché, without reference to race, creed, or color.

Catherine. Paul even saw in the religious practice of the Athenians a desire to draw near to divinity. This he praised, in some sense. God created us in such a fashion that we do seek to be related to God. The multiplicity of shrines may have been an attempt to do that. For Paul, clearly it was not the best way—and that for two reasons. First, the shrines seemed to assume that God was at some distance and needed to be brought near. But God is near. Secondly, it

worshiped out of ignorance of the One True God. That ignorance should be replaced with knowledge. Proclaiming that knowledge was the mission of Paul.

Justo. Paul evidently believed that the worship going on in Athens, though to false gods, would not be counted against the Athenians, since they did not know anything else. But now the True God was being preached to them, and all had changed. It changed not simply because Paul was there. Paul was there because things had changed. What changed them was Jesus. His coming meant that judgment on the world was beginning. The resurrection of Jesus was the sign of that new time of judgment drawing near.

There was a certain gentleness in Paul's words. But there was also an urgency. It is not that he possessed an eternal truth that the Athenians had not yet discovered, but rather he had been part of a series of events in history that made all the difference, and he was trying to include them in that history. It is no wonder that they almost passed like ships in the night. Some felt that what he said made no sense—which, from their presuppositions it probably did not. Others were sufficiently interested to try to arrange a further meeting. We are given no information on any such meetings. Some did believe, and the text includes one member of the Areopagus council, Dionysius, as well as at least one woman, and some other people.

Catherine. What can we learn from all of this?

First of all, Paul's message was one of radical monotheism. This monotheism was so radical that, although as a Jew he was provoked by the multitude of idols in Athens, he did not allow those idols to rival the One God. His speech was not a contest among the gods. He did not compare God with the gods. He simply proclaimed the One True God, creator of all things, and then pointed out that such a view of absolute creation was incompatible with the notion that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone. He could be harsh on such idols, and he even charged their worship to the "times of ignorance." But his objective was not to destroy the idols. His objective was to open his listeners to faith in the One True God.

Justo. Secondly, his message did not end with monotheism. His message had a historical concreteness. The "times of ignorance" were now past. God had fixed a day of judgment, in which the entire world—not just religious people—would be judged by One whom God had appointed—namely, Jesus Christ. Of this, God had given assurance through the resurrection of Jesus.

Since the appointment of Jesus to judge the world and his resurrection are historical events, this is not something that the Athenians could have known by natural reason nor by religious insight. They may have been able to worship an "unknown God." But that unknown God's word and work in Jesus Christ were only known through the communication of this bit of news by those who had either witnessed it or learned it from others. At this point, Paul's message differs radically from any notion of a "natural religion."

Some four hundred years after Paul's speech in the Areopagus, someone claiming to be Dionysius the Areopagite wrote a series of books that soon became quite influential, partly because people believed that they had been penned by Paul's immediate disciple. Appropriating some of the teachings of Neoplatonism, this false Dionysius made much of the unknown God. It is ironic, however, that this unknown God of Pseudo-Dionysius contrasts with Paul's, who "is not far from each one of us," and whose action takes a markedly historical character.

In any case, it would seem that the two issues with which this passage deals are, first, the contrast between the One True God and all the partial gods, the idols of the world; and, second, the call to move from belief in some generally unknown, or dimly known God, to belief in and obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Catherine. With that in mind, let us form into our small groups and deal with some questions.

Let us deal first with the issue of common, amorphous religiosity. Does this text give us any guidance on how to deal with current efforts to introduce "generic" prayer in public schools or to promote a "moment silent a meditation" instead of prayer?

Secondly, let us turn to the issue of idolatry. Though many in our society claim to be monotheists, are there not actually several gods who seem to rule various aspects of our life,

just as there were in ancient Athens? What gods rule the marketplace? What gods rule in the political arena?

Now move to another question: Do some of those gods also rule various aspects of church life?

Can we think of instances in which these gods have made their power felt in decisions of our general conferences, general assemblies, and other governing bodies, both local and national?

To what degree do those gods stand in the way of our true unity? In negotiations regarding organic church unions or common missional endeavors are those gods still present? Is there a sense in which the issue of the unity of the church is also the issue of the unity of God? Or, following Paul's procedure, could it be that one way to combat our divisions is for all of us to rediscover the radical demands of monotheism?

Justo. Let us close with the words of the same apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Romans.

Now to the one who is able to strengthen us according to the gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Rom. 16:25-27).