

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Provocation of Idolatry

Acts 17:16-18

Keywords: Missions, 2nd Missionary Journey, Gospel, Athens, Epicureanism, Stoicism

PowerPoint Presentation included: none

SermonAudio Blurb: Paul had to flee Berea due to unbelieving Jews who came over from Thessalonica to denounce and attack him. The result is that he finds himself in Athens, Greece alone. Here we find this man of God faced with an overtly pagan world and we see how it affects him at the deepest levels of his soul.

I. Introduction.

- A. Read 17:16-18.
- B. Today is an introduction to Paul's time in Athens.
- C. Our time today will be primarily setting the historical stage for you to understand what Paul is doing when he is confronted by the leaders of the city on the Areopagus.
 - 1. We will start with a background of Athens itself.
 - 2. Then we will learn a bit about two major philosophical schools that were prominent in Paul's time.
 - 3. From there we will look at what provoked Paul.
 - 4. And finally we will once again see what is at the core of the Christian message and hope.

II. Background of Athens.

- A. We will look first at its earliest roots, and then to the 1st century AD, where we find Paul wandering the streets of this city.
- B. We begin by learning about the mythical history of its foundations and early development.
 - 1. Athens' story starts in legend, blending myth with archaeology. According to ancient tales, the city was founded by King Cecrops (*kekrops*), believed to be a half-man, half-serpent figure who emerged from the earth itself.
 - 2. It was believed that he introduced and implemented many of the cultural ideals of the Greek mind. In fact, he was believed to be the one who made Zeus to be the supreme deity.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. The area of Greece was rather large. At one point the various cities of Attica were being divided up by the various gods and Athena, goddess of wisdom and warfare, and Poseidon, god of the sea, had a competition for Athens.
 4. Philosophically, the early years were not full of deep thinkers who would later emerge.
- C. Birth of Democracy (c. 800–480 BC)
- 1.
 2. Politically, power shifted from kings to the nobility, who ruled through the Areopagus council—a body of former archons (chief magistrates) meeting on the Hill of Ares, also known as the Areopagus.
 3. Enter a man named Draco in the 7th century BC.
 4. In 594 BC, Solon was appointed archon with extraordinary powers to reform.
- D. There was about an 80 year period starting in 490 that is called the Classical Golden Age.
- E. Philosophically, Athens became "the school of Hellas (Greece)."
1. Socrates (469–399 BC).
 2. Plato (423–348 BC).
 3. Aristotle (384–322 BC).
- F. By the 1st century AD, Athens was a cultural hub, rather than a political or military powerhouse.
1. Philosophically various key schools of thought arose, Epicureans and Stoics were key ones.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. It was a city that loved ideas but also one that did not believe in absolute truth, Protagoras taught the famous idea "Man is the measure."

III. The Epicureans and Stoics.

A. Epicureanism, taught by Epicurus in late 300's BC.

1. It is one of the most misunderstood ancient schools of thought—often reduced to “eat, drink, and be merry” hedonism—but its actual teachings are far more nuanced, sober, and practical..
2. Pleasure is the highest good (but not in the way people think).

3. The *Tetrapharmakos* (“Four-Part Cure”)

4. Atomic materialism.

5. Prudence and choice.

6. “Epicureans believed in the gods being utterly transcendent.

7. View of resurrection. They rejected it.

B. Stoicism is an ancient Greek and Roman philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium (Κίτιον, *kition*) around 300 BC.

1. At its core, Stoicism is not just theory—it’s a practical operating system for living a good, resilient, and meaningful life regardless of external circumstances.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. Stoics were panentheists, similar to pantheism. There is only one god and it is nature. Therefore, the Stoic would believe in the inherent immanence of god.
3. The Dichotomy of Control (The foundation of everything).
4. Virtue is the Sole Good.
5. Love of Fate.
6. Practice Negative Visualization.
7. Focus on the Present Moment.
8. View of resurrection. They rejected the idea of a resurrection and immortality of the soul.

IV. The Provocation of Paul.

- A. We see Paul now walking about the city.
 1. The area would be primarily the Agora and surrounding areas.
 2. A veritable forest of idols so everywhere Paul went he would see altars and statues and temples of every sort.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. Paul was provoked in his spirit.
4. This provocation in his soul is what then motivates him to act in vs 17.
 - a. Notice the “so.” The many idols moved Paul to act. It is not clear that Paul every planned on going to Athens. It is very probable that his actual plan had been to go to Corinth, but problems in Berea interrupted them.
 - b. If this is correct, then Paul was just spending time here recovering from the other events and the difficulty in travel.
 - c. And so he finds himself in the synagogue teaching and then out in the marketplace/agora interacting with those who happen to be there each day.
5. Notice in vs 18 that this prompted some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers to engage him.
 - a. In vs 17 we see the word “reasoning” which is that term for having a conversation, a dialogue, or a back-and-forth discussion.
 - b. But in vs 18 there is a new term, “converse” is the English term but it means to dispute or debate.
6. Note though the reactions Paul raised in the various people talking to him as well as those who are listening:
 - a. “Idle babblers.”
 - b. Teacher of strange deities/gods.
7. But in all of this mess we see the faithfulness of Paul.

V. The Core of the Christian Message.

- A. Even though the people got the wrong conclusion, the message was clear, Jesus and the Resurrection.
 1. Let me make this clear to you again. You cannot be a Christian and you cannot expect that you are forgiven or have eternal life if you get Jesus wrong.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. There are so many things that you can be wrong about. But not about Jesus. This is not just a small, passing point. It is **the point**.
 3. Who Jesus is and what Jesus did is critical. His death and resurrection are not vague things to sort of believe. They are at the very foundation of the Christian's hope.
 4. This is why over and over and over you find Paul taking people in every place to the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Christ and that He had to suffer, die and rise again.
 5. And if the best you have right now is that you vaguely affirm these things but have no idea why, then you should fear for your own soul.
- B. What you see in Athens is that their minds were so paganized that the terms and ideas entered and then were reconfigured.
- C. Beloved, we want you to love Jesus too. But we want you to know what that means and why you should love Him.

VI. Conclusion.

- A. So there you have it, a jet tour through the history of Athens, its philosophy, its gods and its beliefs.
- B. The stage is now set for us to see how Paul will manage to deal with this whole mess next week as he faces the religious and philosophical leaders of the city.

Benediction

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

