

## **Why Do We Want A God That We Can Control?**

**Acts 17:16-34**

**Do you have a problem with idol worship?**

**Most people will say, “No.” However, is that true.**

**Why do people say they are spiritual, but do not follow all the Scriptures?**

**What Does The Bible Say?**

15 Those escorting Paul went with him all the way to Athens; then they returned to Berea with instructions for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him. 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. (Acts 17:15–16 NLT)

**It should bother us when people have a false view of who is God.**

18 He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “What’s this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he’s picked up?” Others said, “He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.”

19 Then they took him to the high council of the city. “Come and tell us about this new teaching,” they said. 20 “You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it’s all about.”

22 So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, 23 for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about. (Acts 17:18–20; 22-23 NLT)

**Paul did not start with the first commandment, but the second commandment.**

24 “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, 25 and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. (Acts 17:24–25 NLT)

**Idols are wrong because we do not make God, He made us.**

28 For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring. (Acts 17:28 NLT)

**The idea of idolatry rests on the absurdity of human beings trying to make an accurate image of God.**

**How Can You Obey?**

15 “But be very careful! You did not see the Lord’s form on the day he spoke to you from the heart of the fire at Mount Sinai.

16 So do not corrupt yourselves by making an idol in any form —whether of a man or a woman, (Deuteronomy 4:15–16 NLT)

**God does not want us to look, but to listen.**

**We make an idol whenever we worship an image rather than listening to the Word.**

**We live in a visible world.**

**We make an idol whenever we turn God into something that we can manipulate.**

**The Egyptians did not think that the gods actually lived in their idols, but they did think that idols gave them the kind of spiritual contact that would enable them to control their gods.**

**We make an idol whenever we choose to worship God for some of his attributes, but not others.**

**When people say, “I like to think of God as ...” they are usually remaking God in their image.**

**What can save us from our own private idolatries?**

**The answer is very simple: Rather than remaking God into our image, we need to be remade into his image.**

### **Additional Notes:**

If you would like to use your home to disciple others, check out our training at [www.crosswaveschurch.com/host](http://www.crosswaveschurch.com/host). Cross Waves

has produced short videos to train you how to use your home to reach others for Christ. So please check it out.

### **Additional Notes:**

This week's Talking Theology is from Philip Graham Ryken, *Written in Stone: The Ten Commandments and Today's Moral Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 72- 80.

### **Explore:**

Paul left Berea and made the 200-mile trip down to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy behind. He was alone in the glorious Athens of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno. Though it had been some 400 years since the golden age of Pericles, Paul found the city's glory and prestige intact. Athens was the intellectual center of the world (much like Oxford in the nineteenth century), and scholars from all over the inhabited earth made her their adopted home.

Even though the Romans conquered Athens in 146 b.c. Athens retained her supremacy, because the Romans loved everything Greek and so did not change her status as a free city. Despite all her glory, Athens was empty because she was living on the memories of the past. In philosophy she simply repeated the echoes of men long gone. Her art was no longer innate overflow but a lingering reflex. It was to such a city that the apostle came—proud, glorious to the eye, but dead. What a contrast between the apostle and the metropolis.

R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 230.

### **Explore:**

Paul's approach was brilliant. As courteous and conciliatory as possible, he complimented them on being "in every way... very religious." Paul was undoubtedly eager to protest their idolatry and point them to the truth, but he restrained himself and gave a genuine compliment first. He met them where they were. "In my

stroll around your famous city I found an altar to an unknown god. Let me tell you about the one who you are worshiping.”

Paul established common ground.

His message also made brilliant application, for he pointed directly to the problem. The word translated “unknown” is the root from which we get agnosticism, which means “without knowledge.” The Athenians were supposed to know everything, and they did, almost. But on the most important truth they came up short—they did not know God. Paul did not say this—they did (“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD”). Many of them probably grasped the apostle’s irony.

Having established the bridge, Paul now began giving the Athenians doses of spiritual truth—first about God and then about themselves. Truth about God always helps us understand ourselves.



“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.” (vv. 24–25)

The fundamental truth about God is that he is the Creator: “the God who made the world and everything in it.” That may not sound earth-shaking to us, but it challenged their whole theology. The Stoics were pantheists and the Epicureans practical atheists. Paul’s declaration denied the premises of both groups. The accompanying statement in verse 25 that God is the Lifegiver—“he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else”—drove the truth home even further, for it directly attacked the Epicureans’ belief that God was absent and the Stoics’ belief that he was in everything. As the giver of life, God is actively here, but he is not contained in creation.

The final great truth about God is that he is not only the Creator and the Lifegiver, but he seeks us out.

“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” (vv. 26–27)

Practically, Paul was saying that they were not living in Athens as a result of some cosmic accident. Rather, God had structured their lives in order to attract them to him. Great truths about God led to the truth about themselves: they were specially created by God, and he was seeking a personal relationship with them.

R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 232–234.

**Explore:**

Under cover of night, Paul and Silas left the city and headed for Berea, about forty-five miles away. It does not appear that Timothy was with them, as he was probably working in Philippi. Later, he would join Paul in Athens (Acts 17:15) and then be sent to Thessalonica to encourage the church in its time of persecution (1 Thes. 3:1ff). Since Timothy was a Gentile, and had not been present when the trouble erupted, he could minister in the city freely. The peace bond could keep Paul out, but it would not apply to Paul's young assistant.

Paul went into the synagogue and there discovered a group of people keenly interested in the study of the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, they met daily to search the Scriptures to determine whether or not what Paul was saying was true. Paul had been overjoyed at the way the people in Thessalonica had received the Word (1 Thes. 2:13), so these "noble Bereans" must have really encouraged his heart. All of us should imitate these

Bereans by faithfully studying God's Word daily, discussing it, and testing the messages that we hear.

God used His Word so that many people trusted Christ. One of the men who was converted was Sopater, who later assisted Paul (Acts 20:4). He may be the same man (Sosipater) who later sent greetings to the Christians in Rome (Rom. 16:21).

Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 471.

### **Explore:**

17:18–19. In his marketplace ministry, Paul encountered a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (see “Deeper Discoveries”). The nature of their philosophy hardly captures Luke's primary attention: simply two secular schools of thought trying to make sense out of life apart from biblical revelation. We could

substitute pragmatism, utilitarianism, atheism, agnosticism, communism, or a host of other more modern philosophies.

As they engaged in dialog with Paul, they called him a babbler (spermologos), less a term of derision than a description of his philosophy. Though hardly philosophical allies, Epicureans and Stoics at least attributed some order and design to each other's system of thought. Paul seemed to be a "seed-picker," a word used to describe birds picking up grain or even poor farmers finding seed in the marketplace, taking it home, sowing it without separating the types, and, therefore, reaping a field of mixed grain. These sophisticated thinkers saw Paul as somebody who had picked up bits and pieces of philosophy with no coherent system. In other words, he was eclectic.

Other critics saw the distinctive theological thread in Paul's preaching and correctly analyzed his emphasis on a God other

than the many they worshiped in Athens. Perhaps they saw Jesus as the new God and resurrection (anastasis) as his chief goddess.

Since the Areopagus is both a hill and the formal name of a court which often met on that hill, scholars are divided as to the meaning of verse 19. The niv clearly implies a formal hearing, though hardly a trial. Longenecker says, “We should doubtless understand Paul’s appearance before the Athenian Council of Ares as being for the purpose of explaining his message before those in control of affairs in the city so that he might either receive the freedom of the city to preach or be censored and silenced (Longenecker, 474).

If the Council met on that gigantic flat rock (it sometimes met in the royal portico in the northwest corner of the Agora), the sight was spectacular. The Parthenon stood just off to the right if he addressed the group facing down to the Agora. Today, in ruins, the splendor and aura of the place still excite the visitor familiar

with this narrative. Today Areopagus is the name of the Greek Supreme Court and still fascinates Christians when they hear the term.

Kenneth O. Gangel, Acts, vol. 5 of Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 288.

### **Explore:**

‘The Lord is God’

(4:1–49)

Andrew Knowles, The Bible Guide, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 95.

Moses tells Israel that her strength lies in obedience to God. She must never forget the darkness and fire of Mount Sinai, when

God gave her the Ten Commandments. The law is Israel's greatest treasure. It is to be learned, digested, lived—and taught to the children of every future generation. God is invisible and not to be imaged or modelled as an idol. It will be Israel's privileged task, by her obedience, to show the reality of God to the nations of the world. Moses warns the Israelites that if they turn to idol-worship they will lose their land and not regain it until they repent.

Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide*, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 95.

### **Explore:**

The first three chapters of Deuteronomy are filled with examples of God's direct involvement and intervention in Israel's past history. In chapter 4 Moses exhorts the people to remember from



past experience that God blesses obedience. He wants them to experience future success by recalling past victories.

The introductory “now” of this chapter refers to Moses’ preceding speech. It is preparatory to the appeal to obey, as though he is saying, “And now, in light of God’s acts of deliverance, you should obey His commandments.”

Deuteronomy 4 is a miniature sermon on the covenant and the law. This law forms the basis of the covenant relationship. An understanding of the law, its nature and purpose, is expanded here, so that the people’s obedience will be based on comprehension. This law is not simply a written code to be framed and hung on the wall. It is presented to the people for the purpose of education and application. The life of the Hebrew nation would depend on the law, not in a totally legalistic sense, but in the sense that the law was the basis of the covenant wherein lay Israel’s close relationship to their God.

Therefore Moses exhorts, “Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe.” The observation and application of the commandments will accomplish two things. (1) Israel will receive full enjoyment of life (vv. 1–4). (2) Israel will be different and draw other nations to God (vv. 5–8).

John C. Maxwell and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 5 of *The Preacher’s Commentary Series* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1987), 82.

### **Question 1 of 5**

Give an example of a time when you tried to do the right thing but did it wrong. What were the results?

### **Question 2 of 5**

What is the relationship between the first and second commandments? In other words, how are they different, and how do they inform one another?

### **Question 3 of 5**

As you think of your own family or other families you know well, how does the threat contained in the second commandment affect how you view family difficulties, and the legacy parents leave for their children?

### **Question 4 of 5**

What makes idols so appealing? What are some ways in which Christians in general, and you in particular, are tempted to worship idols?

### **Question 5 of 5**

How can you guard against idolatry in your church and your own life?