

Belief in a Pluralistic Age
Acts 17:16-34
National Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
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And Paul makes a decision in Athens not just to spend his time with his fellow Jews -- to tell them that their Messiah has come. But to -- go into “the world” → into the Market Place – (a place called the “Agora”)

The Context -- the cosmopolitan, pagan and pluralistic city of ancient Athens -- **Acts 17:16-18**

*Paul . . . was deeply distressed to see that Athens was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, **and also** in the marketplace/agora every day with those who happened to be there. Also some **Epicurean** and **Stoic philosophers** debated with him.*

1. The EPICUREANS *were like modern-day agnostics*:

If the gods existed at all they were far off and unknowable and therefore irrelevant to modern life

If the gods existed at all they had definitely not given to human beings any outside prescription for how to live life, OR ultimate moral law to follow . . . so that human beings were on their own to be bold and brave, to make their own way through life as best they could, and find happiness wherever we could, no matter what cards we’ve been dealt

The STOICS, were somewhat similar in their approach to life.

Though, they ***believed the opposite about the gods***: That “god” was close & everywhere – a great cosmic force (like Star Wars), and our human job is to find happiness – the good life -- by aligning our thoughts, emotions and actions with the laws of the universe. Because, to them, the whole universe, the world of nature, including your fate -- was in some sense divine

Science is not just good – but god; The environment is not just good – but god; The course of events is not just good – but god!

So . . . “Get with the program!” Be on the right side of history (of “what IS”). Stay close to god – and you’ll be ok!

Not that you can KNOW God – this god is **not** personal.

3. The **average MATERIALIST IDOLATERS**

Was a person who would probably have “bought into” the general principles of the Epicureans and Stoics whether they knew it or not. But, then

these pagan idolaters were materialists who placed their faith in specific material objects, the things they made!

Ultimate reality was what you could touch and feel & handle

And so -- **this was the Athens Paul found himself in**

1. There was **no life beyond death** – no possibility that all the injustices of the world would ever be sorted out in the end.
2. There was **no possibility of knowing *ultimate* right and wrong**
All the standards, if they existed at all, were inside them in their own feelings and choices
 - There was no one to look to – who set the standards
 - No one who could say to us “Well done!”
 - or to whom we could say: “forgive me!”
3. There was **no Personal Creator God** who -- like a parent -- *owned us, gave us life, held us accountable & loved us, and who could be -- and wanted to be – known.*

BUT This was what Paul believed the sophisticated people in Athens needed to know, and shared with them at great personal risk. And this is what we -- in our modern pluralistic society need to know too.

When Marykay Powell left home she left the church too.

After all, it was the 1960’s then -- and she worked in the movie industry. “*Religion,*” she says, “*just wasn’t relevant.*” Decades of 80-hour workweeks passed as Ms. Powell produced or co-produced everything from *Barbarians at the Gate* to *Harriet the Spy*. Weekends found her on private jets bound for resorts in Mexico or Arizona.

But along the way, she says: “*An unease set in. An unease that I had lost sight of what was important. At first I couldn’t put my finger on it. And then it hit me. I’m separated from God.*”

But she didn’t run back to church. Instead she tried everything else. She attended lectures by new-age guru Marianne Williamson and she also attended lectures by the Dalai Lama. She took Buddhism and Biblical History at UCLA.

Only after a professor encouraged her to take a bible study course he was teaching at a local church did she walk through the door again.

“I’m going to sound nuts,” she says. “But it wasn’t until I asked God to forgive me for being away (DR: this is repentance) that I was comfortable going back to church again. I had to say, ‘Please take me back. Please help me.’” WSJ (1998)