

New in Town

Acts 17:16-23



Background

Paul was on his second missionary journey (see map). Paul's message about Jesus Christ was often rejected, especially by his fellow Jews. In Thessalonica, some of the Jews opposed Paul, so he was sent away to Berea (*Acts 17:1-10*). The Bereans were more receptive, but the Jews from Thessalonica caught up with Paul, and he was sent away again (*17:11-14*). This time, he was escorted to Athens, where he waited for his colleagues Silas and Timothy to join him (*17:15*).

Paul's Concern

☐ Read Acts 17:16-21.

1. As Paul waited, he walked around the city, and he was “greatly distressed.” He was “deeply troubled” (*17:16, ENLT*). Why was he so disturbed?



Reflection: Christians, do you sometimes get “deeply troubled” as you look around *your* surroundings? What do you get troubled about?

Paul's Actions

☐ So what did Paul do? He talked to people. He “reasoned”¹ with them (*17:17*). He did this in two settings, and with various people:

- The synagogue (Jewish religious center)
 - ‡ Jews & God-fearing Greeks² (*17:17*)
 - The marketplace
 - ‡ Those who happened to be there, including Epicurean³ and Stoic⁴ philosophers (*17:18*).
2. What philosophies do *you* encounter (or maybe believe) that conflict with Christian teaching?



Athens (undated drawing)

Reflection: Christians, in what places do *you* talk about Jesus Christ? To whom do *you* talk? Can you “reason” with others concerning your faith? (*1 Peter 3:15*)

¹ ‘reason’ (*dialegomai*) – speak, preach, or argue about differences in belief or opinion

² Generally, ‘God-fearing Greeks’ refers to non-Jews who are attracted to Judaism, but are not full converts.

³ Epicurean – named after the Greek philosopher Epicurus (340-270 BC). This philosophy presented pleasure and tranquility (including freedom from pain and the fear of death) as the main goal of life. It was based on the atomic physics of Democritus and was thoroughly materialistic. It did not deny the existence of gods, but maintained that the gods had nothing to do with human affairs. It taught self-restraint, moderation, and detachment.


⁴ Stoic - claimed Zeno (c. 340-265 BC) as founder. This philosophy emphasized harmony with nature, reliance on the rational faculty, and individual self-sufficiency. It taught a unity of all into a ‘cosmopolis’ (Universal City) with Reason (*Logos*) as the underlying principle behind the universe. It was highly moralistic with a high sense of duty.

Athenian Response

- ❑ The philosophers talked with Paul (17:18).
 3. What did they think, and say, about Paul?⁵ Why did they say these things? (17:18)⁶
- ❑ What did they do with Paul? (17:19-20)
 - They took him and brought him to the Areopagus.⁷
 - Then the Council of Areopagus asked him about his “new teaching” and “strange ideas.”
- 4. Why do you think they were interested in Paul’s teaching?⁸ In general, why might non-Christians be interested in learning about and discussing Christian teaching?

Reflection: If you are not a Christian, why are *you* interested in Christian teaching?⁹

Paul's Response

- ❑ Read Acts 17:22-23.
 5. Paul noted, “I see that in every way you are very religious” (17:22, *NIV*). Is this a good thing? Explain.
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- ❑ Paul said he found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Then he said, “What...you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (17:23, *ESV*).¹⁰
 6. Among the many gods in Athens, there was still “an unknown god.” What do you think this reveals about their religion or philosophy?

Reflection/Application

- What is *your* religion or philosophy? Do you feel that it is thoroughly adequate? Or do you feel that something is missing? Review this handout, consider the questions, and come back!

⁵ Some called him a ‘babblers,’ translated from the Greek word *spermologos* – lit. ‘seed picker;’ figuratively, ‘one who picks up scraps of knowledge’ Others said, ‘He seems to be advocating foreign gods.’

⁶ Paul was preaching the ‘good news about Jesus and the resurrection.’ What is the ‘good news?’ Christ suffered and died for our sins, but was raised from the dead. His death in our place provided the way of forgiveness, and restoration to relationship with God. By his resurrection, he defeated sin and death, and provided the way of abundant, everlasting life. Salvation is a gift of God, received through faith in Christ.

⁷ ‘Areopagus’ (Gr. *Areios pagos* – the hill of Ares; Mars’ Hill) – The name of a hill west of the Acropolis; but here probably refers to the Council that originally met on the hill (but in NT times usually met in the ‘Royal Porch’ in the marketplace). The Council had special jurisdiction in matters of morals and religion.

⁸ Reasons varied. Some had a sincere desire to understand and consider Paul’s message. However, the writer (Luke) adds that they ‘spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas’ (17:21). Apparently some of them enjoyed discussing and debating truth more than earnestly seeking truth with the intent of accepting it.

⁹ Whatever the reason (spiritual seeking, cultural learning, English practice, etc.), I’m glad you are interested! If you are skeptical, I encourage you to consider the ‘possibility’ that Christianity is true and directly relevant to your life.

¹⁰ “[Paul] is not simply identifying for them the God they had been honoring all along without realizing it, as some have claimed ... The wording of Acts 17:23 makes it clear that they have been worshiping a ‘what’ (*ho*), not a ‘whom;’ an object, not a personal God [*contra NLT*]. Paul is keenly aware that their present state of ignorance must be corrected by a *true* knowledge of God through the proclamation of the gospel.” (Dan Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005]), p. 76)