

## ACTS: ALIGNING WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK OF DISCIPLING

### XLIV. God's Pattern For Evangelizing Pagans

(Acts 17:18-34)

#### I. Introduction

- A. The book of Acts explains "the orderly and sovereignly directed progress of the kingdom message from Jews to Gentiles, and from Jerusalem to Rome," Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 351. We can thus learn much about aligning our ministry efforts with God's sovereign work from studying the book of Acts.
- B. Acts 17:18-34 present's Paul's encounter with pagan, idolatrous Greeks in Athens, what required a significant amount of pre-evangelism before Paul could present the Christian Gospel in a way that Athenians could understand it. We view this passage for insight on God's pattern for evangelizing pagan today (as follows):

#### II. God's Pattern For Evangelizing Pagans, Acts 17:18-34.

- A. When Paul had left reasoning with attenders in the synagogue at Athens to evangelize in the marketplace, he faced Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who had no background in the Hebrew Scriptures, Acts 17:17-18a.
- B. They thus viewed Paul as a "babblers," *spermologos*, a "seed-picker," who, "like a bird picking up seeds, took some learning here and some there and then passed it off as his own," *Ibid.*, p. 402-403. Others said he touted "strange gods" as his "doctrine of Christ and the resurrection" was "foreign" to them, v. 18b; *Ibid.*, p. 403.
- C. The Greeks and foreign residents in Athens liked to debate the latest ideas (Acts 17:21; *Ibid.*), so the Stoics and Epicureans brought Paul to the Areopagus, the "venerable council that had charge of religious and educational matters in Athens," to hear his views, v. 19-20; Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to Acts 17:19.
- D. Paul's address to these pagans thus set God's pattern for evangelizing pagans in the Church era, v. 21-31:
  1. Having learned from his experience in the Athenian marketplace that his listeners were so immersed in pagan views that they interpreted Paul's words in line with their philosophies to conclude that he was a mere "seed-picker," when Paul later spoke at the Areopagus, he laid a clarifying foundation, starting with truths that his listeners knew and accepted before moving then into the Gospel of Christ, Acts 17:21-30:
    - a. Paul stated that he observed that his listeners were very religious, illustrating this fact by referring to the inscription he had seen in the area of "To The Unknown God," Acts 17:21-23a. "The Athenians, who feared they might overlook venerating some deity they did not know about, dedicated an altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD," *Ibid.*, Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 403.
    - b. Without condemning his listeners' idolatry, Paul began his address to them by informing his hearers about the God that they did not know, the God of Scripture, Acts 17:23b.
    - c. Paul spoke of the Creator of the universe Who did not live in humanly created temples, a new concept to the Athenian Greeks (Acts 17:24; *Ibid.*), a God Who was not sustained by human provisions, a concept that would appeal to the Epicureans who believed that the gods were above human events, v. 25a; *Ibid.*
    - d. Paul added in v. 25b that God provided mankind with life and material needs, what aligned with Stoic philosophy as the Stoics tried to align their lives with the perceived "Purpose" of the Cosmos, *Ibid.*
    - e. At Acts 17:26, Paul's claim that God had made all humans from one man, Adam, countered Athenian pride as they were told they came from the same initial Creation as everyone else! (*Ibid.*)
    - f. In stating that God planned history and national boundaries that people might seek after Him and find Him though He was not far from everyone on the earth, Paul supported these claims by citing the pagan writers Epimenides (in Acts 17:28a) and Aratus (in Acts 17:28b) whom his listeners knew well, *Ibid.*
    - g. If mankind was the offspring of God, He could not be an inanimate image, so Paul argued that the pagan world had been ignorant of the living God, and that this God now called all men to repent, Acts 17:29-30.
  2. Once Paul had the attention and understanding of his hearers, he gave the Gospel, relying on the Holy Spirit's convicting work to use it as the power of God unto salvation, Acts 17:31 with Romans 1:16.
- E. The spiritual response to the Gospel, as had occurred in all of Paul's past evangelistic efforts, was mixed, with some listeners rejecting and mocking, others expressing interest, and others trusting in Christ, Acts 17:32-34.

***Lesson:*** *Realizing that his listeners were so steeped in Epicurean and Stoic philosophies that they did not correctly understand the Gospel of Christ without a properly laid theological foundation, Paul practiced pre-evangelism, starting with true concepts that his listeners knew and accepted to build a base on which to give them the Gospel.*

***Application:*** *May we evangelize effectively by understanding how our listeners think that we might move them from where they currently are in their thinking to the truth of the Gospel of salvation.*