

GROWING AS CULTURAL INTERPRETERS

Acts 17.16-34

Paul enters the Areopagus at Athens having preached the death and resurrection of Jesus. These topics land on his hearers as “strange things” (Acts 17.20). He looks for common ground.

Paul performs cultural exegesis. He draws attention to the inscription to “the unknown god” and quotes their poets Epimenides and Aratus (Acts 17.23, 28).

Paul begins by noting that his hearers are “religious” and interested in “worship” (Acts 17.22-23).

Origins: How did we get here?

How the world came to be and how humans emerged are crucial, non-religious questions. There are not many options on origins:

- a.) Matter is eternal (almost no scientist believes this now).
- b.) The world in its complexities came into existence by chance.
- c.) An incomprehensibly powerful and intelligent being spoke matter into existence.

For Paul, the God of the Bible “made the world and everything in it” and is “Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17.24). The True God cannot be confined to a stone trinket (Acts 17.25, 29). Has Science moved us more in the direction of a Smart Designer?

Are there consequences for telling people they are a result of chance, that life is cheap, that they were not made for a purpose, and that their bodies are malleable?

Morality: How do I know right from wrong?

God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17.26). Man should seek God (Acts 17.28).

How do we get our understanding of right and wrong? Is it forged by laws? Is it defined by cultural constraints? Or is there an ultimate standard that allows us to speak morally?

We see God’s command to “repent” and turn towards Him (Acts 17.30).

If Naturalism (the belief that there is nothing but material) is true, it is hard to understand why we should be concerned about people in distant lands. Christian anthropology gives a much more satisfactory answer as to why we should care about others.

God designed His world with a moral economy where living justly leads to human flourishing.

Judgment: Is there a reckoning for wrongdoing?

All of us look for true justice and we recognize that so many things are beyond our control. Paul says that there is one judge who is the standard for righteousness (Acts 17.31; Cf. Romans 12.19; Hebrews 9.27).

Destiny: Is there a place to be in the end?

God raised Jesus from the dead so those who follow Him can have hope (Acts 17.31).

Key Point: The Christian worldview uniquely addresses life's big questions.

Observation 1: Materialism does not answer these questions.

Observation 2: People move incrementally towards God (Acts 17.27).

Application Questions:

How does Paul speak about the relationship between God and idols? What are the most common idols of our time? How are they inadequate?

What or who are modern equivalents of the "unknown god" or Epimenides? In other words, what widely held cultural assumptions are better satisfied in Christ?

Compare and contrast the atheistic worldview and the Christian worldview on matters of justice. Why is the Christian vision more adequate?