

Acts 17:16-34, No. 36**“Making the Argument”****June 19, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Apparently Athens had not been part of Paul’s plan for this second evangelistic and church-planting tour. He had established churches already in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Where he would have headed next, had he not run into opposition in Berea, we are not told, but it would probably have been Corinth, which is where he went after his unscheduled stop in Athens. While Athens had once been the intellectual center of the ancient world, it was now in decline. But he found himself there and, not being a man to miss an opportunity, he took maximum advantage of what otherwise would have been days of inactivity.

Text Comment

- v.16 Remember G. K. Chesterton’s famous observation the first time he saw all the neon lights in Times Square. He said it must be beautiful for someone who cannot read.
- v.18 It is suggested by some that the people who heard Paul at first thought that he was talking about two gods – one god named Jesus and another God named Anastasis, which is the Greek word for resurrection. Epicureanism and Stoicism were rival systems of philosophy. We have rival systems of philosophy still today. Philosophy systems come and go. Believe me, the one thing you can be sure about today’s systems or schools of philosophy is that 30 or 50 years from now there will be virtually no one who belongs to those schools any longer. I needn’t describe their different views, except to say that Paul was thoroughly familiar with them, as his argument will demonstrate. Like modern cities today, in Athens sophisticated, urbane philosophy jostled with naked superstition. We have our naturalist academic philosophers arguing that human life is a bio-chemical accident and attempting to create some ethical theory out of whole cloth, and we have millions of others reading the horoscopes in their newspapers or practicing eastern rites such as yoga, choosing whatever beliefs please them most.
- v.19 The Areopagus has no exact equivalent today. Perhaps the closest would be the university, a place where scholars reason with one another and where ideas are discussed. It was originally a judicial council, the most venerable institution in Athens, but in the Roman period its powers were curtailed. It exercised jurisdiction only in matters of religion and morals. What the council provided Paul was an opportunity to explain himself.
- v.23 We have here an extraordinarily important point, something all Christians need to have clearly in their minds in our day and age in particular. *The Bible insists on a self-named God* and in Holy Scripture God discloses his name to men. In fact, “name” becomes virtually a synonym for God. But there are only a few names for God in the Bible – principally *Yahweh* and *Elohim*, one a name, the other a title – while the ancient world had literally thousands. The Babylonians had fifty names for Marduk alone. This proliferation of divine names not only suggests that such gods were figments of the

imagination, but it bred uncertainty. A Babylonian penitential prayer is addressed to “the god whom it may concern.” When men begin making up names for God – as the pagan have always done, as philosophers do (think of ‘Being,’ or “the Unconditioned,” or “the Absolute”), or as modern feminism had done, we can safely assume that theology has descended into anthropology, that the so-called gods are simply the inventions of man, a reflection of man’s own desires blown up on a larger screen. Men create gods who are like themselves, if, in their imagination, greater in certain ways.

- v.25 Verse 24 expresses a view of God that was not shared by Epicureans or Stoics, but v. 25 sounds like something they might say, though, obviously, Paul means something else than they would. The Epicureans believed God to be so remote as to have no influence on human affairs; the Stoics believed in God only in a pantheistic – God in everything – way. Neither group had any thought of a personal relationship with God or imagined such a thing to be possible. Nor did they have any confidence in life after death.
- v.27 “Groping for God” describes Paul’s idea of men struggling in the dark because they are estranged from God as sinners. They cannot escape their built-in sense of God, but they cannot find the true God either because they insist on finding God *in their own way*. As Paul puts it elsewhere, man’s estrangement from God darkens his mind and renders his religious impulse futile.
- v.28 A quotation from the 6th century B.C. Greek poet, Epimenides of Crete, some evidence of the breadth and depth of Paul’s learning.
- v.29 If man is God’s offspring, an idol obviously does not correctly represent him or his nature; nor are we free to create him in whatever image we like.
- v.30 Paul was not saying, of course, that the sins of Gentiles didn’t count before Pentecost or that God pardoned idolatry in the ancient world. All that is being said is that God did not make an issue of idolatry in the pagan world as he is now doing, commanding people everywhere to repent of this sin. In Romans 1 Paul makes it clear that from the beginning false views of God have paid a wage!
- v.31 We would not ordinarily think of the resurrection as the demonstration that the judgment is coming because the judge is coming, but in this context that is the argument Paul makes. The 5th century B.C. Greek playwright, Aeschylus, wrote a play about the origin of the Areopagus in which he denied the possibility of resurrection.
- v.34 A later tradition makes this Dionysius the first minister of the church in Athens.

Though Athens was a much smaller town than Rome, and in most other ways less significant, it still boasted an unrivaled intellectual and artistic reputation, inherited from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and glorified by its great acropolis, with its commanding Parthenon, visible from great distances and magnificent in its marble splendor. Athens was proud of the fact that it remained the “empire’s intellectual metropolis.” [Stott, 276] No doubt Paul had heard about Athens all his life, as would have any educated citizen of the Roman Empire, enamored of Greek culture as that

empire was. Most educated Romans not only spoke Greek, they preferred to speak Greek. They thought Greek much more sophisticated than Latin, both as a language and as the expression of a culture. Now he found himself there with some time on his hands. And as any visitor would, he strolled through the town. I'm sure like any other tourist, Paul would have appreciated the architecture and the many sculptures he saw as he walked the streets and toured the acropolis. But as a Jew and all the more as a Christian, what Paul noticed more than anything else was the idolatry. Athens was full of idols. Xenophon, the Greek historian, writing several centuries earlier, described Athens as "one great altar, one great sacrifice." In the Parthenon, that sat atop the acropolis, was a gold and ivory statue of Athena, whose gleaming spear-point was said to be visible forty miles away. But she was not alone. Images of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune and all the rest were there. Everywhere you turned there was an idol. Athens, indeed, was very religious! [Stott, 277]

So Paul began to explain his message. What he said demonstrated not only his learning and his intellectual power, but his determination to win his audience. Unlike in his other sermons or speeches in the book of Acts, here we find no citations from the Bible, but we do find citations of Greek poets and philosophers. He was using their own intellectual tradition to pave the way for the Christian gospel. He found where he could agree with their beliefs – those places where "they still had a grip on the hem of the robe of truth" – all truth being God's truth and any part of it, if consistently followed, leading to all the rest, and built his case on that. He credited them with a desire to know and worship God and with their knowing that God is greater than man and that he doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He challenged their belief system, but only after gaining sympathy and so a hearing. But take note: Paul didn't simply tell them what happened in Palestine some years before; nor did he simply read the Bible to them. He made an argument for the Christian faith from universal human convictions and experiences.

Paul understood what we must always remember still today. When we explain the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, to people in our time, when we seek to introduce the living God to them, we have allies in their hearts. There are unseen convictions – sometimes unreflected upon, even unrecognized – understandings, and instincts deep within them that reinforce our words. As the poet has it:

Thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, man's unconquerable mind.

Or as John Duncan, Scotland's Rabbi Duncan put it, "The belief in God presses multifariously upon man." We Christians do not deny that there are difficulties in believing the Christian message. There are intellectual, spiritual, and emotional difficulties. But they pale in comparison to the difficulties that unbelief must face. The unbeliever finds himself facing problems far more severe, far more intractable, and far more embarrassing than the Christian ever will. Which is why so many people you know hardly ever think seriously about life or about the future. [J.S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 52-55] God has placed eternity in man's heart, we read in Ecclesiastes. He knows he is not a piece of cosmic scrap, some bio-chemical accident; she knows that right and wrong are real things, not just personal opinions; he knows his life matters; she knows very well that she is a sinner; he knows there is such a thing as justice and such a thing as love. These

convictions are the foundation of his life and of his desires, but only the believer can explain them and only God can account for them and satisfy them. *This is why Christians are rarely intimidated by even brilliant unbelievers arguing against our faith. It is too easy to see what they cannot explain and what we can!*

It was easy to get a conversation going in Athens. People there were always up for a discussion about philosophy and religion. And the newer the ideas the better! So when a man with such obvious rhetorical powers as Paul began speaking of Jesus – someone they had never heard of before – there was keen interest.

Today we too encounter people who are constantly agog over the latest thing, especially technology. Every age has its new thing! People are as proud today as they were in ancient Athens. But like the men of Athens, a town that was by Paul's day a pale shadow of what it once was, people today are also full of desires that they cannot fulfill and are well aware that for all our vaunted accomplishments in technology and the like we have not managed to solve a single one of the great problems or answer a single one of the great questions of human life. In fact, our interest in technology and novelty largely distracts us from hard and clear thinking about the main issues of human life. For all our progress in technology, for all our pretensions to knowledge, as Malcolm Muggeridge once put it, the modern western world has educated itself into imbecility and amused itself into impotence. We are the Viagra generation: having to replace our lost manhood with a pill. We too live in the midst of a civilization in serious decline!

So what was it that Paul said to this people, so like people today, who thought themselves the smartest in the world, inheritors of a proud intellectual tradition? Surely anyone can see that he had his work cut out for him. The descendants of Plato and Aristotle were utterly unlikely to believe that they could live forever only if they committed themselves to some amateur Jewish rabbi who had been executed by the Roman state and then supposedly had risen from the dead! The very idea of the resurrection of the body and of a future life lived *in the body* was an affront to virtually everything any Athenian thought at that time. If they believed in salvation at all, it required *escape from* the body, not the resurrection *of* the body. It is not too much to say that the Christian gospel was as unlikely a message as could have been conceived in that time and place.

Salvation of the world through a Jew? The Jews were a despised race among the Greeks and Romans. It would be like us thinking that the whole secret of human life has been revealed in the life of an Afghani or Pakistani or Saudi. Monotheism in a world that prided itself on its many gods? Salvation by death on a cross, a ghastly barbarity of which educated Greeks and Romans were ashamed? The whole message was getting more preposterous, not less as Paul continued. But Paul was relentless. It is perfectly clear that he thought the facts were on his side and that no matter how long certain ideas may have been entertained by the Athenians, they would not stand up to honest examination.

What we have here is an argument for the Christian faith, a reasoned presentation of the Christian message as both a more accurate explanation of the world and of human life than other religions or philosophies and as the real hope of the human heart for the fulfillment of its deepest longings.

Here begins a great tradition – with certain OT anticipations to be sure – that will continue through the ages and into our present day. Justin Martyr did something similar in his *Apology*, his defense of the Christian faith addressed to the emperor. Augustine followed in Paul's steps in his immortal *City of God*. Patrick of Ireland did much the same thing, arguing for Christianity among the pagan Irish. And so it went: Pascal making his argument for the faith to the rationalists of his day in France, Henry Martyn to the King of Persia, C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer to the unbelievers of the mid-20th century, and Ravi Zacharias to the Harvard faculty and students some years ago. The argument has been made in different ways to different audiences, but *it was always an argument*, a reasoned case: a starting point was chosen, evidence was offered, contrary positions examined and evaluated, and a conclusion reached. Christians, especially over the last century or so have argued, often quite heatedly, about the best or the proper way to make an argument for the Christian faith, but all are agreed that an argument can be offered for the faith, an argument more reasonable, better supported by the evidence, and more consistent with both the experience of human life and the deep-seated longings of the Christian heart than anything unbelief can offer.

But all of these arguments that have been made through the ages for the Christian faith – in some ways uniquely (apologists for eastern faiths, for Islam, and even for secular philosophies argue quite differently than do Christians) – have certain things in common, some of which can be found already here, in Paul's argument to the Athenian philosophers.

I. The first is that they all assume a certain set of assumptions shared by Christians and non-Christians alike, what Calvin called "the seed of religion," and what Paul himself would later describe as an inbred and intuitive "knowledge of God."

There is a consciousness of God in all human beings, a conscious that comes from within and without, as Paul says in Romans 1 and 2, a consciousness that manifests itself in the religious life of man, as Paul says here in vv. 22-23, in the voice of the human conscience, and the inevitable commitment to moral judgment. Here that is revealed in such things as the need to worship God, even if he is not known, for fear of his judgments, a prospect to which Paul returns in v. 31. We have here only a short summary of Paul's remarks and he may well have mentioned other evidences of God-consciousness in human beings, since there are a number of them.

But this was Paul's starting point, what apologists refer to as *common ground*, assumptions shared by believer and unbeliever alike. Nowadays we refer to such assumptions as presuppositions: things we know even if we cannot prove, intuitions every human being lives with, even if he doesn't know where they come from. It was his "hook," to draw them into a reasoned, serious reflection upon God and the world. The situation, the common ground that believers share with unbelievers, is the same today, of course. Most Americans believe in God, though most of them are as vague in their conception of God as the Athenians were. They're perfectly happy to give a number of names to God, and they'll make them up by themselves. But fundamental to their understanding of life were certain convictions and principles that no secularist or philosophical naturalist – someone who thinks that the physical world is all there is – has ever been able to account for. Here, for example, is a classic use of the "seed of religion," this from a letter C.S. Lewis wrote to an unbeliever who was expressing for the first time an interest in the Christian faith.

“At one time I was much impressed by Arnold’s [he’s speaking of Matthew Arnold, the English poet and essayist] line, ‘Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread.’ But surely, though it doesn’t prove that one particular man will *get* food, it *does* prove that there is such a thing as food! i.e. if we were a species that didn’t normally eat, weren’t designed to eat, would we feel hungry? You say the materialist universe is ‘ugly.’ I wonder how you discovered that! If you are really a product of a materialist universe, how is it that you don’t feel at home there? Do fish complain of the sea for being wet? Or if they did, would that fact itself not strongly suggest that they had not always been, or would not always be, purely aquatic creatures? Notice how we are perpetually surprised at Time. (How times flies! Fancy John being grown-up and married! I can hardly believe it!) In heaven’s name, why? Unless, indeed, there is something in us which is *not* temporal. . . . I think you are already in the meshes of the net! The Holy Spirit is after you. I doubt if you will get away!” [A *Severe Mercy*, 93]

Paul was saying a similar thing to the Athenian philosophers. “There is a great deal in your philosophies and your way of life that I can explain better than you can!”

II. Second, this “seed of religion” is expressed by unbelievers in all manner of inconsistent and unreasonable ways.

Paul was not naïve about this common ground that he shared with unbelievers. He knew how misshapen the image of God was in them. A God great enough to account for the world and for the life of mankind is worshipped as a little man-made idol and even thought by some to be contained in man-made buildings and linked to a particular city or people. Paul’s approach in vv. 24-29 was gently to point out these inconsistencies. He doesn’t call them the absurdities because he wants to win a hearing from them.

Again, a God so great as to produce human beings with all their powers, remains in their own minds a person so vague that their practice reveals they are only guessing at what he is like. But the God who gave us ears to hear, the power of speech, minds with which to think high and deep thoughts, and, supremely to relate in knowledge and love to other persons, is not a God who cannot be known and cannot be loved. *He would, he has revealed himself.*

It is this sort of argument of which Francis Schaeffer, in our own time, was such a past master. These inconsistencies were places to strike. He would challenge people to justify without the God of Scripture any of those things so important to human beings that they obviously could not live without them: meaning, morality, their very personhood itself. He was forever pointing out to them that when it came time, philosophically speaking, to pay for what was really important to them, they had to borrow Christian capital. They might deny the Christian God, but they accept without question so much that cannot be explained or justified without the Christian God. Lewis argued in the same way, turning unbelievers’ deepest convictions into an argument for the existence of a God whose existence was the only possible justification of those convictions. As he used to say, he believed in Christianity as he believed in the sun; not only because he could see the sun, but because, by means of the sun, he could see everything else as well.

Christian apologists have long argued that only Christianity explains what every human being knows and cares most deeply about, even though most human beings find it far too easy to assume that there must be some other way of justifying their beliefs. There must be some other way, so I'm just not going to think about what it is. Paul and all who have followed him simply challenge believers to prove there is some other way to justify what matters most to them in the confidence that they never will or can.

III. Third, and finally, Paul appeals to human beings to reckon honestly with reality. There is here a direct challenge to face facts.

Christianity does not hesitate to lead with its chin. It claims the facts for itself and, since there is a seed of true religion in every human being, it assumes that human beings are capable of facing those facts, if only they will. This is a striking feature of Paul's argument. He confidently asserts to these so-called deep thinkers that the facts are on his side, not theirs. He can reason from God to human life and from human life to God, because his Christian faith produces the consistent picture of reality that no other religion or philosophy does.

John (Rabbi) Duncan once put it this way: "No Demiurge – that is, no inferior god [such as the gods who littered the Greco-Roman pantheon] – could have made a conscience like mine! [That is, a conscience that refuses to shut up about what I have done wrong, even when I wish it would!]" And so much more: 1) my penchant for worship to which I give expression in so many different ways every day (I am *homo adorans*, even if I am worshipping a lot of things that aren't deserving of that worship); 2) my powers of speech, of thought, of love; 3) my instinctive recognition of the importance of my need for relationships; I say all of this is too great for idols of my own making to explain. Such a God will not be persuaded to do me good by the paltry gifts I can give him, or be indifferent to my failure to live up to the demands of that conscience, that moral arbiter, he has put inside me.

There is much that is true about human beings that cannot be explained by a pantheon of man-like gods or by no god at all, but only by the fact that all people have been made in the image of the living and true God, the Almighty who created the heavens and the earth. We know human life is sacred, we know moral judgment is justified and not simply a matter of taste, we know that love is an objective reality not simply a chemical or neurological reaction, and so on.

Not many years ago Armand Nicolai, professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, conducted a survey of practicing psychologists on the subject of the basic requirements for a well-adjusted, happy personality. Nicolai is a Christian but the doctors who completed the survey were not, or most were not. The survey concluded that there were four basic requirements for such a life: 1) acceptance of the inevitability of death; 2) self-identity and purpose; 3) sensitivity to the needs of others; and 4) a developed sense of personal standards.

Now we can ask a number of questions about that list. Why should such things be so important to human beings? Why should personal relationships figure so largely or the fact of death loom so large in human experience? And why do human beings who need such things struggle so much in each of those areas? Paul and every Christian apologist who followed him can answer

those questions quite easily. We were made in the image of the infinite, personal, holy God and the human race fell into sin.

What Paul knew and what we must remember is that issues such as these – death, morality, identity, and love – are not theoretical issues. They shape our lives; they are what matter deeply to us. This is, therefore, our argument, as it was Paul's. The Christian faith explains what most needs to be explained; it resolves in an honest and powerful way the problems that loom most threateningly on the horizon of human life. *We should be a confident people, knowing that we have – as no one else does – an explanation for life. We get it. We know where it came from, we know why it goes wrong, we know how to fix it. We can explain what others cannot. We can face all the facts of human experience without betraying logic or reason or human experience.* Our faith describes the world and human beings as they actually are and our great advantage is that unbelievers know this, even if they don't want to admit it. And, then, we have the answer to the questions these facts about human beings raise: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us!