

# The Unknown God

## Acts 17:16-34

### Illustration:

- Secular humanism's scientific empiricism and the New Age pantheistic type of postmodernism--are remarkably similar to the Epicureanism and Stoicism Paul encountered at Athens.
- New poll – 61% of Catholics (18-29) say its ok for a Catholic to practice more than one religion
- Blogger, who calls himself a Christian, said that Brit Hume abused his power by telling Tiger that he should become Christian because it offers a better path for redemption than Buddhism. The blogger said that he should have defended Tiger and bashed the media and would have looked more Christ-like.
- **Interfaith Youth Core says that** 50 percent of violent acts in the world are committed in the name of religion, so pluralism = peace.

– Paul just arrived from Thessalonica & Berea

### Athens

- Lost political prestige and wealth after war with Rome (146 BC), but Rome let them run themselves
- Home of Plato, Socrates, Epicurus, and Zeno
- PLURALISM: With Alexander the Great's conquest, religion had been exported and imported. Thus → The Greeks, and later the Romans, rather than telling the immigrants that they would have to worship the Greek and Roman gods exclusively, adopted the practical solution of saying, “All right, you continue to worship your gods and goddesses, and we'll worship them, too—and you worship ours.” That way, no one's god was slighted, and everyone was happy.

### 16-21

- Paul greeted by a forest of Idols - City of idols – “you would run into more gods than men”, possible 30,000
- Stoics – followed Zeno (340-265 BC), aimed to live consistently w/ nature, emphasized reason and self-sufficiency, pantheistic.
- Epicurean – followed Epicurus (340-270 BC), pleasure chief aim, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.", gods didn't care about human affairs.
- V.16 religious or superstitious... word is ambiguous so Bock says “they have a religion . . . but it is wrongheaded”

Athenians – wanted to hear what was new (Demosthenes 4 centuries prior rebuked them for this when Philip of Macedonia's aggressive policies called for deeds not just words.), may be an outgrowth of their philosophical roots.

Davies on problem with Pluralism, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold' because there is no one center and often no centers? . . . The new pluralism can often become banal, trivial and pretentious, like a fish in that ocean [of the transcendent] always keeping its mouth wide open, afraid to shut it, and therefore never taking a bite"

## 22-31

- Paul challenges Stoic pantheism and Epicurean materialistic deism by testifying that *the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth* (Ps 146:6; Is 42:5).
- Religious not meant to be complimentary (it was actually illegal to compliment in order to get goodwill)
- Unknown God
- Served - Service (*therapeuo*) is "cultic ministry [and] consists in the bringing of sacrificial fruits and any cultic action which might give the impression that the deity is referred to some human performance" (Beyer 1965:129).
- Those in Athens believed that they were the only autochthonous—from Greece. All others immigrated.
- Paul says that all came from Adam & Eve, no racial superiority

## Sermon Points

- creator of the universe
- sustainer of life
- ruler of all nations
- father of mankind
- Judge of the world
- Proof: God raised Him from the dead.

"They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—  
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!—  
But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever,  
For in thee we live and move and have our being."  
(Epimenides the Cretan, c. 600 BC)

"Let us begin with Zeus. Never, O men, let us leave him  
unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus,  
and all the market-places of human beings. The sea is full  
of him; so are the harbors. In every way we have all to do with Zeus,  
for we are truly his offspring."  
(Phainomena – Aratus [born 310 BC])

- Zeus is supreme being of Greek and Stoic philosophy (not just ruler of pantheon)

## 32-34

- All but Epicureans would have agreed with an afterlife, but none would have agreed with a resurrection.
- Apollo supposedly said at the founding of the Areopagus by the city's patron goddess Athene "Once a man dies and the earth drinks his blood, there is no resurrection."
- According to Eusebius, Dionysius became bishop of Athens (but also supposedly authored a body of Neoplatonic literature believed to be from the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries)

What objections do postmoderns have to the gospel? Pluralists? Humanists?

Humility, on the other hand, compels us to recognize that the God "who does not live in shrines made by human hands" (17:24) also does not live in the shrines we construct from our own particular religious traditions (Gaventa, 39).