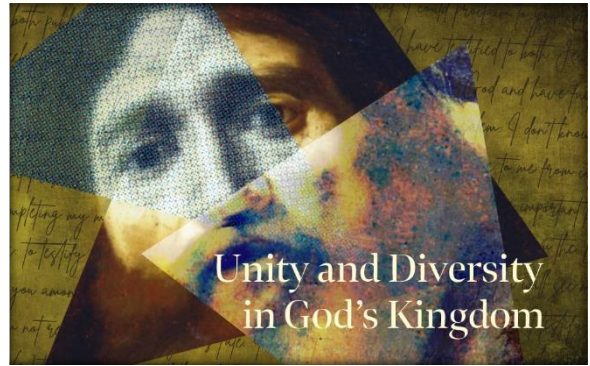


## “Paul - On to Athens and Corinth”

*Acts 17:16-34; Acts 18:1-17*

***Paul’s second missionary journey continues southward along the eastern coast of Greece, focusing on Athens and then Corinth.***



The Christian church has an immense intellectual heritage, which, sadly, comes as a surprise to many. From its beginning, Christianity has embraced a life that loves with, as Jesus put it, heart, soul, mind, and strength. All of it. Head, heart, and hands.

Paul brought to his God-given vocation not only a deep faith and vast reserves of energy, but also a towering intellect. He would approve of Alistair McGrath’s book, *Intellectuals Need God Too*.

When Paul arrived in Athens on his second missionary journey (see Acts 16-18 and the map on page 2), he soon headed for the council of the Aeropagus, a group of deep thinking Athenians that had once held a fair bit of power. So far as the Athenians in general, Luke writes, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). Deep-thinkers. Lots of them. Perhaps not too surprising given the rich heritage of Greek philosophy and culture. After all, this was the home of Plato and Aristotle and countless other philosophers.

The Athenians had their ideas about the nature of reality. What the world is. Who we are. The problem with the world. Even its solution. In other words, they had a worldview. Everyone does. And the Greeks embraced the idea that there is something larger than themselves, something unseen but quite real, whether it is Aristotle’s first mover theory<sup>1</sup> or the entertaining pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses.

When Paul rises to address these men, he talks to them in their language and quotes to them their own philosophers. He gets right to some of their deepest questions, such as the nature of being, so that he might talk to them about the God-Who-Is, the God who created all things, created humans in his image, and who provides everyone with being.<sup>2</sup>

### ***A treasured possession***

The truth is that there is a god and not just any god, but God, the LORD God. And as Paul told the Athenians, God made the world and everything in it. God is near. Indeed, we couldn’t get away from God if we tried. Ignore God, yes. Escape, no.

We are not the product of time and random mutation acting on some primordial soup. I’m not just my dog but with a bigger brain. Humans are unique among God’s creatures, being made in God’s image. God has set us apart for a purpose. We are to be a holy people.

All this, of course, ought to humble us; too often, it makes us prideful and arrogant. We forget our responsibilities; we behave in quite unholy ways. But still, there is a God who has revealed to us who we really are.

### ***But is it true?***

How do we know that the claims we make are true? Because, as Paul said to the Athenians, God resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of that claim.

There is only one reason to be a Christian - because you believe that the Christian claims are true. Not because you need help with some aspect of your life or because you want to belong to something. Certainly, becoming a Christian will change the course of your life and help you cope with life’s travails. Becoming a Christian will widen your circle of friends and make you part of a worldwide community. But those are consequences of belief, not reasons to believe. If, in the end, you believe that Jesus is largely a mythological figure or simply a very wise person who showed us a better way to

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<sup>1</sup> The theory that the cosmos began with a first or prime mover that had not itself been moved or acted upon by any other agent. Aristotle sometimes called this prime mover “God.”

<sup>2</sup> Then as now, a philosophical argument revolved around the nature of our being. We call ourselves “human beings,” but aren’t we really always “becoming”? None of us are exactly the same from moment to moment. I’m told that I’m losing brain cells by the thousands every day! Heraclitus, one of the Greek philosophers, wisely noted that one can’t step into the same river twice. The river too never stays the same. So where do we get our “being?” Paul provides the Athenians with the answer. It is from God, “in whom we live, move, and have our being” (17:28).

live -- then don't bother. No one wants to build their lives on a myth and there is certainly no shortage of wise teachers and self-help books. Rather, ignore the world's lies and hold fast to the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### **Paul goes on to Corinth and meets Priscilla and Aquila**

After leaving Athens, Paul headed for Corinth, a busy, commercial port on the narrow isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnese. One can't really talk about Paul in Corinth without talking about Priscilla and Aquila at the same time. But even their story needs an introduction.

### **Making a new home**

In the days of Jesus and Paul, Jews lived throughout the Roman Empire, from Syria in the east to Spain in the west. Even Rome itself had a substantial Jewish population of perhaps 40,000 or so. The Romans generally left such Jews alone. To the average Roman, the Jews seemed more peculiar than threatening. The Jews believed that there was only one god (yeah, sure) and that this god had chosen them (how silly a thought). The Jews took off work on Saturdays (nice if you can get it!) and avoided all sorts of foods. They even performed some strange rite of physical mutilation on their newborn males. But...so long as the peace was kept, the Romans left the Jews in peace—the *Pax Romana*.

Keeping the peace was important throughout the empire, for controlling millions of conquered peoples was no small task. But nowhere was this peacekeeping more highly prized than in Rome and in 49AD the peace in Rome came crashing down. Suetonius,<sup>3</sup> a Roman biographer of the times, wrote "Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius, the Caesar] expelled them from Rome." His reference to "Chrestus" is probably a reference to Christ. Evidently, followers of Jesus had come to Rome preaching Christ in the Jewish synagogues, triggering a violent response from many Jews. After all, something much like this happened nearly everywhere Paul traveled in the eastern end of the empire.

So, the Jews left Rome, forbidden to return. This would have included Jews who had become followers of Jesus, such as the married couple, Priscilla<sup>4</sup> and Aquila. They were better off than many. They had a portable business; they were tentmakers. They owned property. Priscilla even had had some family money. So they headed east toward the large, bustling Greek metropolis of Corinth. There, Priscilla and her husband set up shop in a storefront and began to rebuild their lives.



Not long after their arrival in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila met a fellow Jew who had come to Corinth to proclaim the gospel, the Good News, of Jesus Christ. His name was Paul. The three of them quickly formed a close bond, for Paul was a tentmaker too. Priscilla and her husband invited Paul to join them in their storefront business and for the next eighteen months the three of them grew their business and grew the young Christian house churches in Corinth, despite the ongoing hostility from the leaders of the Jewish synagogue. Paul was much used to this, but, still, it had to hurt.

### **Moving on**

Priscilla and Aquila were mature Christians when they left Rome. In Corinth, they committed themselves fully to Paul's work and the building of God's kingdom. When Paul decided that it was time for him to leave

Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila left with him. All three made their way to Ephesus, another very important city. Priscilla and Aquila stayed there while Paul went on to Jerusalem. But more about all this next week!

<sup>3</sup> Suetonius lived and wrote about 100 years after Jesus. This quote is from his *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

<sup>4</sup> She is referred to as Priscilla in the book of Acts, though Paul refers to her as Prisca in his letters. Think of this as "Katherine" and "Kate."