

The Unknown Known

Acts 17.22-34

January 14

The title of this lesson, "The Unknown Known," seemed familiar to me. Former Defense Chairman Donald Rumsfeld expressed similar sounding language. Rumsfeld referenced "known knowns" (things we know), "known unknowns" (things we do not know), and "unknown unknowns" (things we do not know we do not know). In the philosophical capital of the world, Paul proclaimed a message about an unknown God that humans may know through Christ.

In Athens, Paul reasoned in the Jewish synagogue and marketplace. In addition, he debated with Greek philosophers. The term translated "debate" in verse seventeen (CSB) means according to a standard Greek dictionary, "to express differences of opinion in a forceful way, involving alternative opportunities for presenting contrasting viewpoints." The philosophers with whom Paul debated represented the three major worldviews. Paul represented believe in God, the Epicureans represented atheism, and the Stoics represented pantheism. Epicureans denied the existence of gods, affirmed that matter alone exists, postulated an early form of evolution, and denied life after death. Stoics affirmed that "a divine spark" existed in every individual and taught a form of reincarnation.

What message did Paul preach to philosophers about the "unknown known," the living God to whom everyone is accountable?

First, Paul introduced the philosophers to the concept of a God that made Himself known (Acts 17.22-23). At the beginning of this discussion, Paul focused on the ignorance of the philosophers (literally, lovers of wisdom). People charged Paul with being "a preacher of foreign deities (v. 18). Paul used an ambiguous term to describe the religion of the Athenians – "extremely religious in every respect." The term translated "religious" has the connotation of "religious" or "superstitious." Whether from being "religious" or "superstitious," the Athenians had an altar of worship to an "Unknown God." Paul reminded them they worshiped a "what" rather than a "who." Ancient secular historians describe numerous altars to unknown gods in Athens. Since the Athenians self-professed ignorance about god, Paul proclaimed a God that could be known.

Second, Paul proclaimed that the God is a God of Revelation and Providence; therefore, He is not unknown (Acts 17.24-29). In the words of one commentator, in this section, Paul proclaimed a truth about God and a truth about humans. First, Paul exalted God as the Sovereign Lord (v. 24). He is the Lord of Creation that made everything including the philosophers (v. 24). Second, God is everywhere present and cannot be localized to a shrine or temple as the Athenians did with the altar (v. 24). Third, God is self-sufficient and lacks nothing; indeed, He is the source/sustainer of all life.

Furthermore, Paul proclaimed the truth about humans. First, all humans have a common ancestor (one man- Adam). Second, in addition to being the Creator God, He is also the God of Providence (v. 26). Third, humans are responsible for seeking God (v. 27).

Third, Paul proclaimed that God is a God of Redemption and Judgment (Acts 17.30-31). Repentance is the only logical response for all humans including the Athenian philosophers. Repentance involves turning from idols to serve the living God (1 Thess. 1.). The God of Creation and Providence has set a particular day in which the resurrected Jesus will judge every individual. The Greek would have regarded the concept of resurrection as gross. The average person sought to escape the prison house of the body. The Epicureans denied life after death. The Stoics affirmed a form of reincarnation. All three views denied personal accountability. Judgment is based on principles of righteousness. Jesus, the righteous one, is the only means by which humans can be made right with God.

Fourth, Paul's proclamation of the God of Creation, Lordship, Providence, and Righteousness received a mixed response (Acts 17.32-34). Paul's message received three varied responses. First, the largest number responded with ridicule. Second, others desired more information. Third, two individuals believed.