

Exegesis Acts 17:16-33 – This text shows that Catholicism is idolatrous as is the huge majority of Christians

Theme

Shocked by the idolatry in Athens, Greece, Paul seeks some common ground with which to lead people to the real worship of God which is based on a relationship with the risen Jesus.

Context - Historical

According to Acts, Jesus having risen from the dead and given the Holy Spirit to the Church to make it a missionary Church, chose Paul as a missionary principally for the Gentiles.

The passage is about how Paul presented the gospel to pagans in Greece.

What kind of Passage is it?

Like the Acts of the Apostles as a whole, the passage seeks not only to show the faith makes sense, but that it is attractive too. This is down to its missionary purpose [1].

The author tends to select historical material that serves an apologetic purpose. He hopes to show how believers can train themselves by emulating the training of the believers in Acts.

An example of how the passage defends the faith is in how Paul finds common ground with the pagans and uses that to offer them a better knowledge of the God they worship unknowingly. Paul treats the alleged resurrection of Jesus as evidence that Jesus is to function as the one through whom will justly judge the world one day. The passage contains nothing that arouses suspicion of non-historicity. It is history. It is also pious for it seeks to win adoring friends for God.

The passage is an example of the theological nature of the Acts and how it teaches us “over and over again the heart of the gospel: the death and resurrection of Jesus” [2]

What does the Passage Teach?

While in Athens, Paul was very upset to see how many idols there were in the city because he was in love with God and wanted others to experience that warm love instead of being captivated by fake gods.

The passage presents Paul showing the example of preaching to the Jews in Greece and the God-fearers - non-Jews who believed Judaism but who stopped short of converting in full to the faith. And he also preached in the market so that the pagans could hear him. This helps us realise that like Paul, we “must go to where the people are, and to those settings where serious discussion of ideas, even religious ideas, is natural and expected” [3].

Paul was taken to a meeting of the Areopagus - pagan philosophers, by people it seems who wanted to hear the “strange things” he was saying. They had not heard the Jesus message before.

Paul tells the people of Athens that they are very religious people in every way. This could be translated as saying they are superstitious or religious. Paul was being careful not to dignify their beliefs by calling them religious but he didn't want to arouse rancour by calling them superstitious so he used double-meaning [4].

When Paul preached about the risen Jesus and how this was good news, people said “He seems to be advocating foreign gods” [5]. That may indicate he was proclaiming Jesus as divine. Or it could be that they took it for granted he was preaching a God when they heard him stressing the importance and work of Jesus.

Paul says that God made people of all nations from one man. He refers to Adam in the Book of Genesis.

He said that all people “are God's offspring” meaning God is the reason why all things exist. He quoted a pagan poet as saying that. He was seeking some common ground to build on.

Paul then argued that we must not worship images because we are the offspring of God. Did he mean that we can see something of God in ourselves? I think so. He might not have meant that we are made by God therefore worshipping images is worshipping what he has made. God making something does not automatically prove the worship of statues and

images to be wrong. Some religions use the excuse that the divine intends to be worshipped with idols who he indwells. The notion that there is something of God in us which makes us yearn for him is implied by the context which says God wants people to “seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” [6]. The message is that if you do not have a relationship with God and learn about God within and see what he works in your heart you are an idolater. He wants you to find God in yourself instead of treating statues and other entities as expressions of God or of aspects of his nature.

Paul found an altar inscribed with “to the unknown God” or it could be translated “to an unknown God” [7]. I favour the latter translation as it fits the context. The pagans were using the altar not to honour the God they didn’t know but to honour any pagan or other kind of deity they feared offending if he or she was left out.

“You are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.” This is supposed to prove that the pagans really worshipped God as the unknown God. But nobody can sincerely worship what they do not know. No wonder Paul “used neuter, not masculine forms: ‘what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’ Since they acknowledged their ignorance of the divine nature, he would tell them the truth about it” [8]. Thus Paul was not saying they were worshipping the true God - he is only reminding them they admit they don’t know him at all and offers to help.

Why does Paul not tell them that they are ignorant of the very being they worship? Why does he call God a thing? I think it was to indicate that God is a real entity and not an abstract focus of worship. Some pagan philosophies understood the gods not as real beings but as personifications of abstract qualities such as courage, lust etc.

In the context of seeking and finding God he said, “he is not far from any one of us” [9]. Thus idolaters are always responsible for not turning to God. If you need statues to help you focus on God instead of just focusing on and getting to know God in the intimate recesses of your being you are an idolater and showing that the relationship with God you have is all in your head. Or you may not care that there is no relationship.

Paul is aware that religion and worship can be used as masks for pride so he says that God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything” [10] for God is all powerful and thus needs nothing from anybody. This is a refutation of the notion that certain people are needed to give you a relationship with God. The notion of priests having to put God into babies by baptising them and forgiving sins and providing Jesus in the form of the Mass is repudiated. Paul is saying that no person can bring you to God. God is independent of human activity.

Paul says we must not think that God is like an image of any kind. This is not so much a comment on idolatry so much as a comment on the notion that we can cut God down to a size that makes him more familiar to us and that makes us more comfortable. We must not let our ideas dictate what we are to think of God. We must see that God is bigger than any of our ideas about him. Why? I’d answer with McGrath’s words, “There is a world of difference between knowing an idea [of a person] and knowing a person” [11]. How much more would that be true if the person is God. God is so different from a human person and thus the danger of adoring the idea of God that you have more than him or opposed to the real God is drastically increased.

Paul says God overlooked the ignorance of the idolater in the past but now calls for repentance. He sought to motivate his hearers to repent for the man Jesus would judge them and he claimed that the resurrection of Jesus was the sign that this would be. He implies that Jesus is a man now and not a resuscitated ghost or anything. Jesus has been raised indeed in his view. I understand why Barclay wrote, “The proof of the pre-eminence of Christ is the resurrection. It is no unknown God but a risen Christ with whom we have to deal” [12].

The passage ends with Paul leaving the council after some of them sneered about his teaching on the resurrection of Jesus. Greek philosophy tended to think of the body as contemptible and could not imagine having it back forever in the resurrection.

The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the council would be like today’s philosophers who think that God even if he exists has no relevance to our moral and spiritual lives. Though Paul talked with them and shared “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” they failed to understand and called him a babblers. This reminds us of how Paul wrote that the gospel was absurd in the sight of the philosophers. The passage reassures believers in Christ that if they look for common ground and talk to people at their level, there is no need to fear preaching the gospel.

Relevance for today

Paul was very distressed at the sight of the idols. What a contrast with most of today’s professing Christians who reason that those who worship the idols worship God darkly but sufficiently. They use that as an excuse for leaving the idolaters

unevangelised. The passage is clear that the only way the pagans could be said to worship God is by their worship of an unknown God. If you worship an idol, you do not worship God in any sense. To worship God means you acknowledge his goodness and want that goodness to be shared with you and grow in you through his help. God, by definition, would need to be a God of love and justice and beauty. We will become dehumanised unless we knowingly worship him for we distort those attributes and are inspired by an inadequate version of them instead. This helps us realise that if we make gods out of good things such as money and fame we are as much idolaters as those who adore statues. The drive in us and the idolaters is the same.

Colossians says that greed is a form of idolatry. The Bible sees idolatry as immoral by definition.

Christians say they must hate the sin of idolatry but carefully guide people into abandoning it of their own will. They say only God is to be worshipped.

The Bible teaching about idolatry is startling for it shows that Catholicism and Orthodoxy must be idolatrous and they are the “Christian” majority. We see too how the Protestant Churches do a superficial job of avoiding idolatry. They do little about people adoring the God they have invented and not the real God if there is one.

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[1] Green, C. The Word of His Grace (Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), p. 36

[2] Barnett, P. The Birth of Christianity (William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005), p. 152

[3] Larkin Jun. W.R The IVP New Testament Commentary Series - Acts (Inter-Varsity Press, 1995, p.50

[4] ibid p. 50, “May be understood either negatively as superstitious fear of the gods (Plutarch Moralia 164E-71F) or in a neutral, even positive sense, as the NIV (Aristotle Politics 5:9:15, p. 1315a). Paul puts the ambiguity to good use.”

[5] Acts 17:18

[6] Acts 17:27

[7] Bruce, F. F. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of the Acts, (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) p. 335

[8] Bruce, F. F. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of the Acts, (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) p. 336

[9] Acts 17:27

[10] Acts 17:25

[11] McGrath, A. The Unknown God, Searching for Spiritual Fulfilment (Lion, 2002) p. 67

[12] Barclay, W The New English Study Bible, The Acts of the Apostles (The William Barclay Estate, 2003) p. 155