

## *Paul – on to Athens and Corinth*

### WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5<sup>th</sup> in a fourteen-part series

September 18, 2022

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*Acts 17:16–34 (NRSV)*

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

<sup>18</sup> Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) <sup>19</sup> So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” <sup>20</sup> It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” <sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup> From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we too are his offspring.’

<sup>29</sup> Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

<sup>32</sup> When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup> At that point Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

*Acts 18:1–17 (NRSV)*

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, <sup>3</sup> and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. <sup>4</sup> Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

<sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. <sup>6</sup> When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” <sup>7</sup> Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. <sup>8</sup> Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were

baptized.<sup>9</sup> One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; <sup>10</sup> for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.” <sup>11</sup> He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

<sup>12</sup> But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. <sup>13</sup> They said, “This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law.” <sup>14</sup> Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; <sup>15</sup> but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters.” <sup>16</sup> And he dismissed them from the tribunal. <sup>17</sup> Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things.

*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 below), 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 Plato and Aristotle’s first mover 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>1</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. He is near. Indeed, we couldn’t get away from him if we tried. Ignore him, 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

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<sup>1</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).

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 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.

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

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<sup>2</sup>This business of truth, proof, and belief is tricky. The truth is that our lives are built upon what we believe, not what we can "prove," for humans can't prove much at all, save that Euclidean geometry I learned in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

<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."

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.

### Jewish-Christians?

For many of us, Jews and Christians are in two separate categories that we don't mix together. So, when we read in the New Testament about Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians it can be rather confusing.

ALL the first followers of Jesus (Christians, we call them) were Jews who embraced Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. They placed their faith in Christ but never understood themselves to be giving up their Jewishness; instead, Jesus was the culmination of Israel's story, not a replacement for it. Paul was such a Jew. As the movement spread across the empire, increasing numbers of Gentiles (non-Jews) came to faith in Jesus, worshiping alongside the Jewish-Christians. With time, the number of Gentiles overwhelmed the number of Jews in the movement.

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 on-going 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!



## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Isaiah*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.