

Worship Gone Wrong (Acts 17:16-23)^a

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Context

1. **Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke on what will become known as Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey**
2. **Preaching in Berea**
3. **Jews of Thessalonica travel to Berea to stir up opposition to Paul**
4. **Paul is sent across the sea to Athens while Silas and Timothy remain in Berea**

Passage (Acts 17:16-23)

[16] Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. **[17]** Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the [Gentile] worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. **[18]** Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection. **[19]** And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine [is] of which you speak? **[20]** "For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." **[21]** For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. **[22]** Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; **[23]** "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you."¹

Something New

1. ***For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing (v. 21)***
2. **Searching and searching, but never finding**
 - A. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers - reasonable ideas and conclusions in view of their materialistic presuppositions
 - I. Based upon human inquiry — start with the mind of man as the means of arriving at truth (subjective — reasons from inside of man out)

- II. Compare with Christianity — starts with the revelation of God as the means of arriving at truth (objective — reasons from outside of man in)
 - III. Characterized by the ongoing study and discussion (and discussion, and discussion) of fundamentals principles such as existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind.
 - IV. Classic philosophical questions include: Is it possible to know anything and to prove it? What is the nature of reality? What is [really] real? No . . . really!
- B. Interest piqued by mention of a “foreign gods” - had not heard of the unique aspects of Christianity²
- I. Jesus and the resurrection - God became a man, died, and rose again
- C. The appearance of always being ready to learn
- I. . . . *May we know what this new doctrine [is] of which you speak? . . . We want to know what these things mean.* (Acts 17:19-20).
 - II. Sure you do!
- D. Lovers of something new
- I. *You are bringing some strange things to our ears* (v. 20)
 - II. Paul given a platform (for a time) at the Areopagus (translated “Mars Hill” in the KJV) — not far from the marketplace where they encountered Paul.
 - a. A hill NW of the Acropolis in Athens
 - b. A place of public legal proceedings by a court by the same name — where Socrates stood trial
 - c. A place of philosophical discussion and inquiry
 - III. As we'll see when we reach the end of the chapter, they were interested in “strange things” but not things which call for repentance and submission
- E. Religious
- I. Paul had been *passing through and considering the objects of [the Athenians'] worship* (v. 23)
 - No city has ever seen such a forest of statues as studded the marketplace, the streets and the sides and summit of the Acropolis of Athens.*³
 - a. The art, architecture, and statues (today: media) reveal those things which preoccupy society

- b. By looking at the externals of a culture, one can take the temperature of the internals which motivate and fascinate

II. *I perceive that you are very religious* (v. 23)

- a. Notice this important point: they were very religious, but did not know the truth and were bound for hell
- b. Family friend commented, upon hearing I was attending seminary: “That’s great, we need more religious people!”
- c. The world is full of religions and the religious, but mostly devoid of truth
- d. This focus on religious form typically leads *away* from truth—not toward it

III. A modern example: the rising popularity of “Ancient-Future Worship”

- a. The good: a negative reaction to the consumer-oriented, seeker-friendly, mass-marketed church movement
- b. The promise: “It’s a very participatory act in which the assembly and its leaders seek to go deep, following ancient practices of our ancestors in the faith, and at the same time offer the best we have of ourselves today.”⁴
- c. The problems:
 - i. A rejection of transformation through the *mind* in favor of a the deceptive idea that Christian transformation occurs through *inward contemplation and experience*
 - ii. People seek outward form, ritual, goose bumps
 - iii. In most forms, it is not ancient enough—does not go all the way back to the simplicity and purity of the New Testament⁶
 - iv. Caught up in the mystics and rituals which arose centuries after the death of the Apostles
- d. The result:
 - i. Yet another way to be religious while avoiding submission to God’s Word and the hard work of true Biblical transformation
 - ii. Anti-doctrinal: rejects the hard work of true sanctification which requires engaging the *mind* through Scripture⁸
 - iii. True Christianity concerns inward substance, not outward ritual
 - Paul told the church at Rome how true transformation takes place
 - *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what [is] that good and acceptable and perfect will of God* (Rom. 12:2)
 - iv. Paul wrote the church at Ephesus to *be renewed in the spirit of your mind* (Eph. 4:23).
 - Peter tells us to *gird up the loins of your mind* (1Pe. 1:13).

F. Well did Paul describe these distractions in his letter to Timothy

- I. *Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth* (2Ti. 3:7)
- II. How apt a description of much in the world that passes for religious and philosophical inquiry

Worship Gone Wrong

1. City given over to idols

2. How is it that they had gone so far astray, having “lost” the knowledge of the One True God?

A. Mankind purposefully walked away from God at least twice

- I. In the time of Adam and Eve, every person living personally knew of God
- II. Following the flood, everyone disembarking the ark knew of God personally
- III. What happened?
- IV. Lost tribes may be lost in the sense of their spiritual destiny, but they forefathers did not “lose God” — the actively rejected God, purposefully walking away from His light
 - a. . . . *this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil* (John 3:19)
 - b. Unlike the common moth, man will not come to the light!

B. Yet men will not admit of their part in this willful descent into darkness

- I. Claim to be genuinely seeking but . . . the Psalmist wrote:
 - a. *The LORD looks down from heaven upon the children of men, To see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; [There is] none who does good, No, not one* (Ps. 14:2-3).

3. Yet an internal, compelling need to worship remains - if not the genuine One True God, then all kinds of spiritual malarky results

- A. Our God-implanted desire to worship, having been twisted by the fall, brought need of the Second Commandment

- I. *You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness [of anything] that [is] in heaven above, or that [is] in the earth beneath, or that [is] in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. . . . (Ex. 20:3-5a).*
- II. Here is evidence of the Athenian's motivation to worship: concerned they might have missed a god, they constructed an altar bearing the inscription, "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD."
- III. How far had Athens departed from the truths once known to Noah and his family!
- IV. If the people of Athens, being Gentiles—without the light of the Jewish law—were at fault, how much more the Jews who had that light?!
 - a. Jeremiah describes Israel's profligate idolatry, *Saying to a tree, 'You [are] my father,' And to a stone, 'You gave birth to me.' For they have turned [their] back to Me, and not [their] face. But in the time of their trouble They will say, 'Arise and save us.' But where [are] your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise, If they can save you in the time of your trouble; For [according to] the number of your cities Are your gods, O Judah (Jer. 2:27-28)*
 - b. At times, the proliferation of false Gods in Jerusalem rivaled that of Athens—both Jew and Gentile share historical culpability for idolatry
 - c. And if not in Jerusalem, then the false altars in the "high places": set up, on occasion destroyed by the rare godly king, only to be reestablished¹⁴

It has been observed that God created man in his image and man has returned the favor.¹⁵

4. Examples

A. Worshiping that which *does not* exist: "gods" with a little-G

I. Aaron

- a. *And he received [the gold] from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This [is] your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Ex. 32:4).*

II. Jeroboam

- a. *Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (1K. 12:28).*

III. Josiah - when cleansing the temple (2K. 23)

- a. Articles for Baal, Asherah, for the host of heaven, a wooden phallus, horses and chariots dedicated to the sun, altars of various gods (2K. 23)
- b. Idolatrous priests burned incense to Baal, the sun, the moon, the constellations, all the host of heaven (2K. 23)

IV. Ezekiel - what God shows him going on in the temple prior to God's departure and its destruction by Babylon

- a. *So I went in and saw, and there-every sort of creeping thing, abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed all around on the walls (Eze. 8:10).*
- b. *Then He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? For they say, 'The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.'" (Eze. 8:12)*
- c. *So He brought me to the door of the north gate of the LORD'S house; and to my dismay, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz (Eze. 8:14).*

V. The historic pantheon of godless gods is indeed extensive. In the Bible alone, we find mention of dozens of false-gods which have garnered man's misdirected worship

- a. Adrammelech, Arpad, Asherah, Ashtoreth, Astarte, Baal, Baalzebub, Bel, Chemosh, Dagon, Golden Calves, Gozen, Hamoth, Haran, Hena, Horus, Ivvah, Jupiter, Melkart, Mercury, Molech, Moloch, Nebo, Nehushtin Nergal, Nibhaz, Nisroch, Rezeph, Rimmon, Sepharvaim, Shima, Sin (the moon god), Succoth-benoth, Tammuz, Tartak, Telassar, Zeus

VI. How pathetic and foolish is the attention of man when steadfastly avoiding God!

B. Worshiping that which *does* exist, but which is not God

I. Nature

- a. In his review of the Ten Commandments prior to Israel crossing into the promised land, Moses elaborated on the Second Commandment
 - i. He warned, *[take heed], lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and [when] you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them, . . . (Deu. 4:19).*
 - ii. History shows that Moses' warnings to his fellow Jews ultimately fell on deaf ears.
- b. As Israel descended deeper and deeper into idolatry, the worship of nature was taking place even at "God's house"—the glorious temple previously built by Solomon in Jerusalem

- i. *[God brought Ezekiel] into the inner court of the LORD'S house; and there, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, [were] about twenty-five men with their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, and they were worshipping the sun toward the east (Eze. 8:16).*
- ii. The American Indians, one of many streams of mankind whose forebears departed from God's truth, also fell prey to the worship of nature, as recorded by two early anthropologists prior to our age of political correctness:

Although the Indians had innumerable aetiological myths explaining, for example, how daylight began, why winter and summer alternate, why the raven is black and the sea-gull white, and why the chipmunk has stripes along its back, yet there were no true creation stories, no myths attributing to the will of a creator the genesis of stars and planets, earth and water, day and night, the seasons, animals and plants.¹⁶

The deities of the various tribes were most often attached to the sun, moon and the sea.¹⁷

- c. Nearly two-thousand years ago, Paul explained this well-worn path resulting from the rejection of God's truth: . . . *[men] became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. . . . [the result being they] . . . exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever (Rom. 1:21-25)*
- d. This trend continues to our day

The Humanist Manifesto II states, We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.¹⁸

- i. Unwilling—claiming to be unable—to find evidence of God within creation, man and nature are elevated, paving the way for the ultimate elevation and worship of a man.

II. Angelic Beings

- a. Paul warns the Colossians not to be deceived by those who worship angels (Col. 2:18).
- b. Because of their glorious appearance and powers, even the apostle John misdirected his worship toward angels—not once, but twice (Rev. 19:10; 22:8).

- c. The Bible reveals that fallen angels actively misdirect and empower much of the idolatrous worship taking place throughout history—especially where human sacrifice is involved (Lev. 17:7; Deu. 32:17; 2Chr. 11:15; Ps. 106:37; 1Cor. 10:21; Rev. 9:20).
- d. The Bible reveals that the worship of angelic beings will ultimately intersect with the worship of a man.

III. Men

- a. Nebuchadnezzar - set up a golden image, clearly intended to represent his kingdom, if not himself (Dan. 3)
 - i. A preview of the coming attraction when all the world will worship a Satanically empowered man
- b. Paul and Barnabus worshiped as gods in the likeness of men (Acts 14:12)
- c. Antichrist - the ultimate godless man, the worship of a man empowered by the ultimate fallen angel—Satan
 - i. Represented in the book of Revelation as the embodiment of a composite “Beast”, John *[saw] one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. . . .* (Rev. 13:3a)
 - Having miraculously recovered from his wound, all the world will marvel and follow in wonderment when he rises again from the bottomless pit (Rev. 11:7).
 - It is he who will, *exalt himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he [even] sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God* (2Th. 2:4).
 - The focus of worldwide worship—which should be reserved for God alone—will then be directed to Satan, his demonically-empowered man, and the image of the beast.
 - *So they [will worship] the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they [will worship] the beast, saying, “Who [is] like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?”* (Rev. 13:4)
 - *. . . all the world [will marvel] and [follow] the beast* (Rev. 13:3b)
- d. Mankind will become desperate:
 - For a savior, but not the Savior (Mat. 1:21).
 - For a prince of peace, but not the Prince of peace (Isa. 9:6).
 - For an overcomer—especially of death, but not the Overcomer and author of life (John 16:33 cf. Rev. 6:2)
- e. Mankind desires all these things: so long as he is able to avoid acknowledging and submitting to the Living God.

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Endnotes:

1. [Acts 17:16-23](#), NKJV
2. God's (plural): they may have mistaken the word for "resurrection" ([Ἀνάστασιν](#) [*Anastasin*] as being another god along with Jesus ([Ἰησοῦν](#) [*Iēsoun*]).
3. [Ref-0038](#), AREOPAGUS
4. [AFBW](#), [Ancient Future and Blended Worship: What Are They and What's the Difference?](#)^d
5. [PFWP](#), [Pattern for Worship Planning](#)^e
6. Some forms of ancient worship claim to be anchored in patterns revealed in the New Testament. "from its earliest days, the church practiced a two part order of worship: 1) the service of the word; 2) the service of the table. Both these expressions of worship are found in the New Testament. For example, [Acts 2:42](#) records, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching," (the service of the word), "and to the breaking of bread" (the service of the table). [Acts 20:7-11](#) also records a Sunday worship pattern of Word and Table. We also see images of Word and Table in Luke's account of the Emmaus story ([Luke 24:13-35](#)). This basic pattern of word and table was firmly established by the second century."⁵ While such a starting point seems reasonable, in practice it often leads to embracing practices which came much later and which lead far astray from what the New Testament reveals as the norm for Christian fellowship.
7. [AFW](#), Gary Gilley, [Review of Ancient-Future Worship](#)^f by Robert Webber
8. "He calls for us to resist intellectual analysis that he believes stems from the Enlightenment and read the Bible as true but "not for truths" (p. 124)."⁷
9. [AFW](#), n.p.
10. "In [the mind of proponents of ancient-future worship] this has led to an individualistic form of Christianity in which people are concerned too much about redemption from sin and not enough about the rescue of fallen creation in the new heaven and earth (the new creation). This sounds like a useful adjustment in our theological thinking until we learn where it leads—the "redemption of the whole world" (p. 37)."⁹
11. [AFW](#), n.p.
12. "Webber is asking us to accept a form of Christianity not emerging from Scriptures but from the practices of men years after God had spoken His final word in the New Testament. This is the very approach that led to corruption in the "ancient" church and ultimately necessitated the Reformation. Why should we follow the same mistaken paths of the past?"¹¹
13. [Ref-0230](#), 58
14. [Lev. 26:30](#); [2Chr. 33:3](#); [Ps. 78:58](#); [Isa. 65:7](#); [Jer. 2:20](#); [3:6](#); [17:2-3](#); [19:5](#); [Eze. 6:3](#); [16:16,24-25,31](#); [20:28](#); [Hos. 4:13](#)
15. [Ref-0447](#), [Rev. 6:9](#)
16. [Ref-1396](#), 188
17. [Ref-1407](#), 132
18. [Ref-0057](#), July/August 2002, p. 17

Sources:

- Acts 17:16-23** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0038** John Walvoord and Roy. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1983).
- Ref-0057** [The Humanist Manifesto II](#)^g

- Ref-0230** David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).
- Ref-0447** MacArthur, J. (1999). Revelation 1-11. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Ref-1396** Diamond Jenness, *Indians of Canada*, 7th ed. (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 1932, 1977). ISBN:0-8020-2286-8^h.
- Ref-1407** Rodger D. Touchie, *Edward S. Curtis: Above the Medicine Line - Portraits of Aboriginal Life in the Canadian West* (Toronto, Canada: Heritage House, 2010). ISBN:978-1-894974-86-8ⁱ.
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Links Mentioned Above

a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/59_Acts_17_16-23/index.htm.

b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.

c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.

d - See <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/ancient-future-and-blended-worship-what-are-they-and-whats-the-difference>.

e - See <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1742/pattern-for-worship-planning>.

f - See <http://www.christianbookpreviews.com/christian-book-detail.php?isbn=0801066247>.

g - See <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html>.

h - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?0-8020-2286-8>.

i - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-1-894974-86-8>.