

## Misconceptions Concerning God and Man (Acts 17:24-29)<sup>a</sup>

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### Context

1. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke on what will become known as Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey
2. Paul leaves the others in Berea and sails south to Athens
3. Paul's spirit is provoked by the idolatry of Athens
4. Preaches in the synagogue, in the marketplace—eventually taken to the Areopagus where he explains the nature of God
5. Audience made up of “cultured pagans”, numerous philosophers who “spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” [discussed last time]

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### Passage (Acts 17:24-29)

[24] God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. [25] Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. [26] And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, [27] so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; [28] for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' [29] Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.<sup>1</sup>

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### A Tailored Presentation

1. Notice how different Paul's preaching at the Areopagus is from his previous preaching at various synagogues
2. He does *not* start with Jewish understanding and acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament)
3. Instead, he establishes a connection with his listeners based on general revelation, the conscience, the nature of man

4. **BUT, he does not jettison Biblical revelation and attempt to reason by appealing to general revelation alone—this is always conceding too much**
- A. Like the Intelligent Design movement: one can make an ironclad case for a god, but which god?
  - B. There remains an unbridgable gap between natural revelation and biblical revelation which cannot be crossed simply by logical persuasion
  - C. The bible is compatible with general revelation, but it cannot be proven as the only possibly true representation of reality, strictly by appeal to an “outside-in” line of reasoning
  - D. Somewhere along the line, the Christian must take a stand on the authority of biblical revelation over that of man’s faulty interpretation
  - E. The thinking Christian will never jettison biblical presuppositions in a vain attempt to gain a hearing with a skeptic—too much ground is given up to be fruitful
  - F. For one, the skeptic is not neutral as he assumes and vociferously claims—his reasoning and motives are tainted by sin. (Ignore this as an apologist and you’ll find yourself wasting a lot of time!)

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## Misconceptions concerning God

### 1. Misconceptions concerning the nature of God

- A. God is not a “bigger man”
  - I. Our tendency to conceive of God as an “amplified man” — conceptually like a man, but larger attributes in every dimension (more just, more loving, more patient, more powerful, etc.)
  - II. The “man upstairs”
  - III. Holy - not just perfect, but *unique, otherly*
    - a. OT word קָדוֹשׁ [qādōš], derived from kādhash, “to be separate,’ . . . When used of God it signifies: (1) His transcendence, His separateness above all other beings, His aloneness as compared to other gods;”<sup>2</sup>
    - b. Not like anything or anyone else!
      - i. *To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? (Isa. 40:18)*
      - ii. *“To whom then will you liken Me, Or [to whom] shall I be equal?” says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, And see who has created these [things], Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name,*

*By the greatness of His might And the strength of [His] power; Not one is missing (Isa. 40:25-26)*

iii. *To whom will you liken Me, and make [Me] equal And compare Me, that we should be alike? (Isa. 46:5)*

B. God is unlike anything in creation: whether animate and inanimate

I. Last time: “Worship Gone Wrong”

- a. Myriad forms of off-base worship, the historical prevalence of idolatry
- b. Man is *designed* to worship — but prefers to worship anything else *but* God

II. Animate - animals, various creatures, even man himself

III. Inanimate - sun, moon, stars, earth, nature (rocks, crystals)

IV. Imaginary - idols representing deities and concepts having no validity

V. Paul emphasizes the separateness of God from His creation

a. *God . . . made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24a)*

i. He is ontologically different than the entire creation — He is not trapped or contained “within” that which He has made (a logical absurdity)

b. Yet He is immanent throughout His creation

i. “He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27b-28a)

ii. CAVEAT: this is not pantheism as casual readers of the Bible might assume

- Pantheism: “a doctrine which identifies God with the universe, or regards the universe as a manifestation of God.”<sup>3</sup>
- The universe is *not* God or even a *manifestation* of God — He exists apart from and independently of creation—time, space, and matter
- The most that could be said is that the universe reveals aspects of God much like a work of art reveals the mind of an artist
- The art is not the artist!

VI. Ontologically, that which is lesser in being cannot produce that which is greater

a. *Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising (Acts 17:29)*

b. Mankind is created in the image of God — generated originally by God and patterned after attributes of God, but lesser

- c. Like a Xerox machine, the copy does not retain the full resolution of the original—something is lost
  - d. In this case, man isn't even a copy of God — its more like if a color image of a peacock were to be reproduced as a black-and-white Xerox — only worse
  - e. Once the color is lost, the pixel resolution is lost, it can never be recovered — everything subsequently produced by the Xerox copy will be increasingly inferior from the original
  - f. Therefore, it is utterly absurd to consider that *anything* man could produce, fashion, or even conceive of could accurately represent the divine nature
- C. All of these misconceptions have a common flaw — reducing God to someone lesser, someone more readily conceivable, someone more palatable, someone less overwhelming
- D. God recognized this would be our tendency—that we would struggle with the conception of a being for which no known representation suffices
- I. Hence, the second commandment
    - a. *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. 20:4-5a)*
    - b. God does not like to be distorted or misrepresented so He says, “STOP THAT!”
    - c. Allow for the mystery and incomprehensibility of God — anything less will always lead to a form of idolatry whereby God is distorted and reduced

## 2. Misconceptions concerning temples

- A. Not places where a needy and self-absorbed deity seeks worship—as if He had a need for such attention
- B. The primary concept associated with temples is not *worship*, but *atonement*
- C. Biblically, a temples provides a place and means of mitigation whereby sinful flesh may approach a Holy God in some limited way without being consumed
  - I. Without the fall into sin, there would never have been any need for the Tabernacle, Solomon's temple, Zerubbabel's Temple, the NT Temple of the Believer, a Tribulation Temple, or a Millennial Temple.
    - a. No temple in the garden of Eden before The Fall

## b. No temple in the eternal state after the restoration

i. *But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple* (Rev. 21:22)

II. It may seem odd to claim that a temple is more about atonement than worship, but consider these questions:

a. Was there a temple prior to The Fall? [no] Was God worthy of worship prior to The Fall? [yes]

b. Is there a temple in the eternal state? [not in the sense considered here] Will God be worshiped forever? [yes]

D. The purpose of a temple underscores an “inconvenient truth” and unpleasant reminder for mankind: *our fallen, needy condition*

E. Underscores the immense, unbridgable distance between sinful man and the Holiness of God

F. Paul did not soften this issue to avoid offending his listeners — his presentation will include

I. The finality and futility of death apart from God — the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:31)

II. The need to repent: “God . . . now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30)

III. God will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31) . . . YIKES!

G. *These* are the non-negotiables of the true Christian message which Biblical temples underscore:

I. *Impending death* due to separation from God due to sin

II. The need for repentance — to agree with God’s assessment of reality, our position, our need

III. That we will be judged against a standard of absolute righteousness by a Holy God

IV. In summary: our position is hopeless apart from the redemption available in Jesus

H. This is the heart of what the Bible describes as the scandal of the cross

I. Suppressing the scandal becomes a motivation for embracing unbiblical concepts of what a temple (or church) represents

- I. A special place where God hears or responds to us in ways he won't elsewhere
- II. A place for the practice of ritual, liturgy, and religious rites designed to appease a man-like deity
- III. A place to find acceptance by God for doing good deeds

### 3. Misconceptions about worship

- A. *Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything . . .* (Acts [17:25a](#))
- B. We don't offer worship to God because He *needs* it
- C. We don't offer worship to God because He *requires* it
- D. We worship God because He is *worthy* and we are *designed* to worship Him
- E. Westminster Shorter Catechism
  - I. Q. 1. What is the chief end [or purpose] of man?
  - II. A. Man's chief end [or purpose] is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.
    - a. As Paul himself proclaimed: *For of Him and through Him and to Him [are] all things, to whom [be] glory forever. Amen!* (Rom. [11:36](#))

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### Misconceptions concerning Man

- 1. ***And (1) He has made (2) from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, (3) so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; (Acts [17:26-27](#))***
  - A. + Mankind was purposefully made — not produced by chance
  - B. + All mankind is from one blood — we are all relatives of the same parents, variations within a single race
  - C. + We were made for a purpose: “so that . . .”
- 2. **Made from one blood (or one man)**
  - A. Real history is biblical history — Adam and Eve: a single human pair, a single mother and father
  - B. Racism - what shall I say?

- I. Of all belief systems, *Christianity* should give no place to racial bigotry or prejudice
- II. The 70's and 80's - *finally* we seemed to have made progress on this!
- III. Lyrics by Matthew Ward: "Red, yellow, black, and white — we're all equal in His sight"
- IV. How misguided, how unnecessary this curse!
- V. This festering tumor is growing again in our age
- VI. Racism has a close affinity with evolutionary theory

In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin wrote: 'At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. . . . The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro and Australian [Aboriginal] and gorilla.' . . . Thomas Huxley, an ardent defender of Darwin who garnered the nickname 'Darwin's Bulldog', wrote that 'No rational man, cognizant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the white man.' Huxley described whites as 'bigger brained and smaller-jawed.' [Gary DeMar, *Darwin's 'Yard Apes'*]<sup>4</sup>

Even the late Harvard evolutionist professor Stephen Jay Gould noted, "Biological arguments for racism may have been common before 1850, but they increased by orders of magnitude following the acceptance of evolutionary theory." [Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, Belknap-Harvard Press, pp. 127-128, 1977.]<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Designed to seek and worship a Greater

#### A. We are bothered to be alone

- I. We should be — we are designed to seek fellowship, even beyond mankind
- II. Why is SETI such a draw?

#### B. The need of purpose - again, evolution rears its ugly responsible head

- I. If we are not created and merely evolved, then we have no objective purpose!
- II. Sure, you can make up your own purpose, but ultimately it proves unsatisfying and unsustainable—unless you are not much of a thinker or able to brainwash yourself

III. Random chance means there is no design, therefore no Designer, therefore no purpose: it really is that simple!

IV. More than that, we don't really have free will

a. The keen thinker, David Berlinski, in his cogent book: *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*, states:

The most unwelcome conclusion of evolutionary psychology is also the most obvious: If evolutionary psychology is true, some form of genetic determinism must be true as well. Genetic determinism is simply the thesis that the human mind is the expression of its human genes. No slippage is rationally possible. . . . A successful evolutionary theory of the human mind would, after all, annihilate any claim we might make on behalf of human freedom.<sup>6</sup>

V. [Just *how* bad is evolution for human health? How can it be that numerous Christians attempt to wed this toxic nonsense with devotion to Christ?!

C. Refusing to recognize these biblical truths is costing us dearly!

I. Stress, paranoia, panic attacks, addictions (food, substance abuse: drugs and alcohol), mental illness, societal illness, suicide. We see it every day in the news.

D. Living for that which is greater - without it we will self-destruct

I. Mankind is God's "product"

II. The Bible is the "product manual"

III. We should all be born with a tattoo: "WARNING: Operate this product without reading the manual at your own risk!!"

E. Motivated to seek God

I. . . . so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:27)

II. "Grove" is ψηλαφάω [psēlaphaō], "like a person who is blind or in the dark; figuratively, of those who seek to know God through natural and moral revelation apart from special revelation try to find, want to know, feel one's way toward"<sup>7</sup>

a. In the dark: having one type of revelation, but missing the other

b. Having general revelation — available to all people at all times in history: generally available

c. Lacking special revelation — unknowable apart from God's revelation: the scriptures



- d. We grope for God (based on general revelation) in order to find God (by way of divine revelation—the truth revealed in the Scripture)
- e. Groping: the Intelligent Design Movement — specified complex information can only be produced by an intelligent agent (general revelation)
- f. Finding: the Intelligent Agent is Yahweh, the God of Israel, whose Son Jesus died for our sins so that we can be redeemed and overcome death (special revelation)

### III. Groping in darkness requires motivation!

- a. Do you know God?
- b. Are you *seeking, hoping, groping*, in order to *find*?

### F. Back to the Westminster Shorter Catechism

I. Q. 1. What is the chief end [or purpose] of man?

II. A. Man's chief end [or purpose] is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

III. THIS IS A BIG, BIG DEAL: This is at the heart of our very *nature, purpose*, even our *destiny*!

G. Refusal to embrace this reality is producing heartache and despair

H. Accepting God's design for living can only bring peace, fulfillment, health and well being

I. As God told Israel when captive in Babylon, displaced and without hope:

*I . . . you will seek Me and find [Me], when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you . . .* (Jer. [29:13-14a](#))

J. But to seek you must first have *faith*

*I . . . without faith [it is] impossible to please [Him], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and [that] He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him* (Heb. [11:6](#))

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## Prayer

1. **“Make the heart of this nation sensitive, And their ears attuned, And open their eyes; So they see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And turn and be healed.”<sup>8</sup>**



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#### Endnotes:

1. [NKJV](#), Acts [17:16-23](#)
2. [Ref-0485](#), 1266 [emphasis added]
3. [AD](#), pantheism
4. [Ref-0028](#), 28(2), March-May 2006, 51
5. [PN](#), 1
6. [Ref-1386](#), paras. 2138-2148
7. [Ref-0380](#), 413
8. See Isa. [6:10](#)

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#### Sources:

- AD** Apple Dictionary, Version 2.2.2
- NKJV** 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.
- PN** Gary Bates, *The false gospel of Darwinism*, "Prayer News," January 2014, Creation Ministries International
- Ref-0028** *Creation Magazine* (Creation Ministries International), [[www.CreationOnTheWeb.com](http://www.CreationOnTheWeb.com)].
- Ref-0380** Friberg, T., Friberg, B., & Miller, N. F. *Vol. 4: Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Baker's Greek New Testament library. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).
- Ref-0485** Orr, J., M.A., D.D. (1999). *The International standard Bible encyclopedia : 1915 edition* (J. Orr, Ed.). Albany, OR: Ages Software.
- Ref-1386** David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008, 2009). ISBN:[978-0-786-75147-1](#)<sup>d</sup>.

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#### Links Mentioned Above

- a** - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/60\\_Acts\\_17\\_24-29/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/60_Acts_17_24-29/index.htm).
- b** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-0-786-75147-1>.