

Ouachita Baptist University

## Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

---

Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts

W.O. Vaught Archive

---

3-21-1983

### One Man versus All of Athens

W. O. Vaught

*Ouachita Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/vn\\_acts](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/vn_acts)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Vaught, W. O., "One Man versus All of Athens" (1983). *Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts*. 70.

[https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/vn\\_acts/70](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/vn_acts/70)

This Sermon Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the W.O. Vaught Archive at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

ONE MAN VERSUS ALL OF ATHENS

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS  
NUMBER 72  
ACTS 17:22-25

Dr. W. O. Vaught, Jr.  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
Little Rock, Arkansas

ACTS 17:22-25 "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things"

We have already studied the background for the issue Paul presented in his sermon on Mars' Hill. Paul forced the issue with the people of Athens and forced them to give him a hearing on the Areopagus. This is the spot where Socrates was tried and where Socrates made his great death-speech. So here we find Paul in the most famous courtroom of Athens. Christianity is now on the line and Paul is going to declare to the pseudo-intellectuals of this day the one true God and the claim God makes for every human life. These Athenians were intellectuals, we might say intellectual snobs. This type of person is the most difficult of all to win to Christ.

ACTS 17:22 "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious." This is the open courtroom of Athens and the seats for the judges were carved out of solid rock on the Areopagus. The courtroom was large enough to care for several thousand. So we see Paul alone in Athens. His helpers had all been left behind to stabilize the new-formed churches. Paul began by reminding them that from his observations he perceived that they were too religious. Religion in Athens meant attachment to idols of wood and stone. This was not a statement they would resent, for they knew it was true. They would resent the sarcasm with which Paul spoke, though they realized that his evaluation of them was accurate.

ACTS 17:23 "For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." The word "devotions" is another sarcastic term Paul employed, and it referred to their religious exercises. It had a reference to the religion that both the Epicureans and Stoics rejected. These philosophers, these pseudo-intellectuals, who took great pride in their super-intelligence and their mental emancipation, had no place at all in their thinking for any divine power which we call God. So Paul is saying in effect--"I've observed that you are a very religious people". There is nothing that would gall them more than that. Good heavens! These egotistical Athenians knew there was no such thing as a personal God, and long ago they had shed any pretense at religion, and now on top of this, Paul came along and insulted them by telling them that he observed they were too religious. Let us remember that the Greek Pantheon of the past nor the pseudo-intellectuals of that present time would ever bring a person close to God. So Paul made an observation which revealed that he had accurately evaluated their system of religion. He told them that he had found one of their gods with the inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD". For many days Paul had been preaching to these people in Athens, and now he is going to sum up the force of his message in a final public pronouncement. He is going to show the contrast of the True and Living God over against their weak and handmade deities. Many of these heathen idols had altars and a plaque in them with an inscription. The one that attracted Paul most was the one which said "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD". God might be unknown to them, but God was not unknown to Paul. There is an interesting story behind this inscription. In the Island of Crete there was a man named Epimenides. He came to Athens in the time of a great disaster. They were having a plague in Athens and they called on Epimenides as a specialist, a religious specialist. They needed a specialist to tell them where they had gone wrong to deserve such a terrible plague. Epimenides came from

te and told them that the reason they had the terrible plague was this--"You have offended the unknown God". Now their basic offering for sacrifice was a pig. But Epimenides told them that the unknown God didn't like pigs and that they should offer a sheep as a sacrifice. This was very obnoxious to the Greeks, but to get rid of the plague they were willing to do it. They put up the statue, offered the sheep sacrifice, and wrote the inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD".

Look at three points about idolatry.

1. Idolatry is contrary to the very essence of God. Divine essence speaks of divine perfection and statues can never represent a perfect God. No statue or idol of any kind can adequately show forth who God is. God reveals Himself in His Word and through Jesus Christ. Therefore statues or idols can only limit God and cover up the true reality of God. Any man-made idol contradicts the very nature and essence of the character of God.
2. Idolatry is contrary to the nature of man. It takes a living God to satisfy the longings and cravings of man. Anything made with the hand of man cannot meet the needs of man.
3. Idolatry is the Devil's communion table. This is the best way to come to demon possession. When you find any organization that uses idols of any kind, get away from that kind of thing as fast as you can. Idols are more dangerous than any mad dog or any rattlesnake.

Paul goes on to say not "Whom ye therefore ignorantly worship" but rather "Whom, ye being ignorant, worship". Literally translated Paul actually said, "You, being stupid, keep on worshipping". So this is a terrible indictment against them. Paul is on trial, but Paul has suddenly become the judge and they are on trial. In this greatest of all public relations message, Paul hasn't gotten off to a very good start. With a start like this you can readily see they would never call him to be pastor of the church in Athens. Paul has given them sarcasm and insult. This was his approach and it is far from that "Love-The-Brethren" approach.

Paul then says, "This is the God I declare unto you". Jesus Christ is now going to be brought into the picture and Paul will show them why they do not worship Him. In substance, this is what Paul was saying--  
 "People of Athens, let me tell you something! You are trying to fit God into the mold of the Epicurean or the Stoic. But God does not fit into that mold of yours. The Lord I am declaring unto you is unique."

The words "Declare unto you" means a God according to a fixed standard and not the result of the imagination of the mind of man. Later on Paul will quote some of their Stoic poets and show that they are not consistent. Some of you, no doubt, don't like what Paul is saying here and you don't like the way he said these things; but you must remember he has been preaching for many days in Athens and has over and over again already presented the gospel of salvation. He had already preached all over the city to all who would listen to him. So his message on Mars' Hill was a message delivered to people who had already heard the gospel and had heard how Christ died for their sins on the cross. So the main body of his message starts here in verse 24.

ACTS 17:24 "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;" Paul says, "The God that made the world". There is a definite article before God and it has reference to the Lord Jesus Christ.

COLOSSIANS 1:16 "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:"

1:3 "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that made." Paul here presented Jesus Christ as the creator. But these Greeks had been trained to try to reach God through an intellectual approach and you never can come to God that way. You must come to God by walking the road of faith. Paul could have pointed in any direction from Mars' Hill and could call their attention to one of the favorite gods and he could say, "The true God does not dwell in temples made with men's hands". Paul could point to the Parthenon and say, "In that temple of matchless beauty and perfect design that goddess Athena is not a true god, for God does not dwell in a temple made with the hands of man". Please notice that the phrase "Made with hands" is not a verb, it is an adjective. An imperfect man cannot make a temple that contains a perfect God. It takes a perfect God to make a perfect house in which man can dwell for eternity. Man can dwell in God's house through grace, but God cannot and will not dwell in man's house through legalism. There is no way for God to take a man-made house and use it for his permanent abiding place. God is too big and too great for that.

ACTS 17:25 "Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;" This phrase "Neither is worshipped with man's hands" is a most significant phrase. The Greeks had the greatest artists, artisans and sculptors in the earth, and Paul told them that the product of their hands cannot be worshipped. In other words, Paul was saying, "You Athenians believe that it takes the product of the work of man's hands to make God happy, while the truth is it takes the work of God's hands to make man happy". The men of Athens said to themselves, "What is it that makes man happy?" And they answered "Attention". So they said, "We will give God attention and make him happy". "We will put up altars and make sacrifices. We will build beautiful temples and erect statues of our favorite gods and fall down before them and worship. We like pig meat, so we will offer sacrifices of pigs. We like sex, so we will dedicate the sex act to god." You see, this is where the Greeks got their idea of temple prostitutes, and from their idea of homosexualism, they got their idea for a male temple prostitutes. They liked wine so they took wine and poured it over their altars. They thought their god would like the same thing they liked. LOOK AT THIS--THEY SUPER-IMPOSED ON GOD THE THINGS THEY LIKED AND THOUGHT GOD WOULD FALL FOR IT.

Paul adds, "As though he needed anything". Paul is talking to Athens about their terrible miscalculation concerning God. THE ONLY THING THAT CAN BREAK THIS IDEA OF SUPER-IMPOSING ON GOD YOUR OWN IDEAS IS REVELATION. And this is where the Word of God comes in. It has to come from divine revelation. This is why Bible doctrine is so very important.

Paul said, "Seeing he giveth to all". In other words, God doesn't need anything from us, but we need something from God.

The word for "Life" here refers to the life of the soul. It refers to mentality which we get from both our parents, and the old sin nature which we get from the male parent. "Breath" then comes into the man and he is alive physically and spiritually. This means man is given self-consciousness, volition, emotion, conscience, plus the mentality and old sin nature he received at birth. "Breath" makes it possible for life to function and develop. This is the basic foundation for our physical life--both body and soul.

"And all things" refers to the grace of God. In other words, we do not give anything to God, but God gives everything to us.

Paul is saying to these men of Athens--"It is not what man does for God that counts but what God does for man that is important". The greatest human artist in the world can never adequately depict the real character of God. The plan of God, the purpose of God, and the power of God cannot be expressed by the product of a man's hand. It is the work of God, not the work of man, that is important.