

Three Responses at Athens

TEXT: "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, We will hear thee concerning this yet again. Thus Paul went out from among them. But certain men clave unto him, and believed: among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them" (Acts 17:30-34).

INTRODUCTION

In Paul's day, Athens, Greece, very likely in its second millennium, was already an ancient city. Although it had passed its golden age, it remained a center of religious and intellectual activity, renowned as the city of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Zeno, and Demosthenes. Everywhere to be seen were idols and temples, with more statues of the gods in that one city than all the rest of Greece combined. One ancient tribe insisted that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens! Scripture says, "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the city full of idols" (Acts 17:16).

This ancient city encircled a hill known as the Acropolis, which was five hundred feet high. At its crest was the Parthenon, the world's most famous building. Already five hundred years old at the time of Paul's visit, it was made of marble and contained the ivory statue of Athena. The Parthenon stood for two thousand years, until it was blown up by the Turks in the seventeenth century. The Acropolis was also known as Mars Hill for, according to legend, the god Mars was here tried for murdering the son of Neptune. On this same hill, the apostle Paul preached

one of the greatest sermons of the age, uprooting entirely the ancient pagan faith. "And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus, and said, . . ." (Acts 17:22-31).

Paul's sermon at Athens was met by three responses, all of which are familiar to every preacher of every generation.

I. SOME MOCKED

Mockery was the response of some. The record says, "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: . . ." (Acts 17:32; KJV).

How amused were the Athenians by this passionate appeal from a wandering Jew whom they styled a "babbler." The original word *spermalogos* referred to a bird picking up seeds, but had come to specify loafers in the marketplace picking up scraps of information. To these sophisticated, well-bred Greeks, the preaching of a crucified, resurrected Lord was only so much nonsense. Writing to nearby Corinth, Paul spoke of the Greek tendency to despise and disclaim gospel preaching:

For the word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God. . . . For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe. Seeing that Jews ask for signs, and Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto Jews a stumblingblock, and unto Gentiles foolishness; but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21-24).

What is so difficult to handle as ridicule and scorn? It is a powerful weapon used to discourage and dishearten. For example, the American folklore song "Yankee Doodle Dandy" was used by the British during the Revolutionary War to shatter the courage of the colonists and needle their militia. British troops would even sing it

outside a church during religious services. In time, it became a favorite of the American people, but originally was intended to taunt and ridicule them.

Mockery had been experienced by others in the Bible. It was aimed at the prophet Elisha, who was told, "Go up, thou bald head!" It was sadly acknowledged by Job, who wrote, "They that are younger than I have me in derision" (Job 30:1). The apostles were objects of scorn on Pentecost, accused of drunkenness (Acts 2:13). Jesus was ridiculed mercilessly by King Herod, who "set him at nought, and mocked him" (Luke 23:11). Peter predicted that scoffers would appear even in the last days (2 Peter 3:3).

There is no sharper sword in Satan's arsenal than ridicule. Our Lord did not escape it and neither shall we. But in every case God will have the last word and the last laugh:

Because I have called, and ye have refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man hath regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh in the day of your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as a storm, and your calamity cometh on as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish come upon you. Then will they call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they shall not find me (Proverbs 1:24-28).

II. SOME PROCRASTINATED

Others procrastinated and said, "We will hear thee concerning this yet again," which very likely meant, "We will *not* hear you now." To our knowledge, there is no record of their hearing him again.

The most dangerous of all days is the day upon which we discover how easy it is to talk about "tomorrow."

He was going to be all that a mortal should be—
tomorrow.
No one would be kinder or braver than he—
tomorrow.
But the fact is he died and faded from view,
And all that he left when his living was through,
Was a bundle of things he intended to do—
tomorrow!

The Scripture warns, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow" (Proverbs 27:1). Life is compared to "a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4:14). Yet, uncounted

millions have been swept into eternity vowing with the Athenians, "We will hear thee concerning this yet again."

III. SOME BELIEVED

Still others believed: "But certain men clave unto him, and believed: among whom also was Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris, and others with them" (Acts 17:34). Beyond this we know nothing of the Athenian church, though later church history does reveal a sizable congregation in the second century.

The gospel is not an exercise in rhetoric and wordmanship. It is rather a divine message to be believed, received, and obeyed. Peter asks, "What shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17). Paul answers, "And to you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: Who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

The gospel is not so much information to be politely heard and dismissed. In fact, we shall not be done with it until Judgment Day, "the day when God shall judge the secrets of men, according to my gospel" (Romans 2:16). With a salesman, it matters not how impressive the sales pitch, nor how accurate the paper work, if he does not get a name on the dotted line, it is all in vain. Even so, Christ is the Author of eternal salvation, but only "unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). Nothing less than actual obedience to the commandments of Christ will result in a "right to come to the tree of life" (Revelation 22:14). Jesus stands at the door and knocks, but each of us must lift the latch to his heart and let Him in (Revelation 3:20).

CONCLUSION

In 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, President William McKinley was shot by an assailant. He was hurriedly taken to an emergency hospital where doctors immediately operated for removal of the bullets. One had grazed a rib; the other had slashed through his stomach and was lodged somewhere in the

muscles of the back. The projectile could not be found and prolonged probing was impossible due to the President's weakened condition. The patient was closed up and taken to a private residence to recuperate. But a week later he was dead. Had the surgeons been able to locate, trace the path, and remove the missing bullet, he might have lived. It is interesting to note that near the scene of the shooting, on display at the Exposi-

tion, was a revolutionary new device that could easily have located the fatal bullet—the x-ray machine. That lifesaving machine was so near, yet the patient died. Even so, the gospel of Christ was at hand in Athens, available and ready to be appropriated, but some mocked, some procrastinated, and some obeyed. What will you do with Jesus?

—Paul Rogers

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