

THE ATHENIAN CATECHISM:  
WE PROCLAIM JESUS

**22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.**

**24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. 27 God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’**

**29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”**

Athens is on the southern end of central Greece, just where the coastline begins to get interesting. Paul had gone there because he kept getting attacked up north. He would make progress in a city as he preached the gospel, and then the Jews would round up thugs and other unsavory characters to start a riot over his teaching, and he would have to move away. Two of his companions had sent him away with an escort to Athens, several hundred miles to the south, to wait for them to catch up.

But while he was there waiting, for a week or a few weeks, he became upset because Athens was so chock full of temples to idols. It was as if the devil himself had banished the true God from the city apart from one small Synagogue of Jews and had invited in representatives of every cult, every false teaching, and every pagan religion the world had ever known.

Ancient cities like Athens had a central city square that they used as a marketplace, and it was there that Paul began talking with people about Jesus. Some Greek philosophers started to dispute with Paul about his theology, which is what they always did in Athens-- in fact, they invited Paul to stand before the ancient philosophical court that in centuries past had met on the Hill of Mars in Athens, the Areopagus. Although the court had moved, it kept the name and some of its ancient prestige. Paul was going to speak to the greatest minds of Greek philosophy of the day-- on their turf, in their terms.

Because they didn't know anything of the Holy Scriptures, he didn't quote the Holy Scriptures, he simply presented their message with his preaching. He did, however, quote some Greek poets (if you have a Study Bible at home or a copy of the Evangelical Heritage Version, you can find out something about these poets). But he begins with an inscription he found: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. This inscription was actually found on more than one altar in Athens. During a time when a deadly virus had ravaged Greece, the Athenians released some black and white sheep from this hill, the Areopagus, and wherever a sheep stopped, they sacrificed it to the local deity, but since they couldn't find out the names of many of those gods, they made altars to unknown gods, many of which were still standing in Paul's time and for hundreds of years after.

Paul's outline is simple, to the point, and brilliant. It is a **five-part** outline, and each part has three points. This is not only one of the clearest ways of public speaking, it has echoes in some of the greatest literature known to mankind, from the books of Moses to the Book of Job to the plays of William Shakespeare.

Paul explains Christianity with what I would like to call **The Athenian Catechism: 1, Who God is, 2, What God is not, 3, What God does, 4, What this proves about God, and 5, What God wants and offers, which is revealed in Jesus, risen from the dead.**

**Paul's first article: 1, WHO GOD IS.** a) To the Greeks, the true God had long been forgotten, and by now he was unknown. b) If you want to know which of the many gods of Athens this is, then we will happily acknowledge that this "UNKNOWN GOD" is the true God. c) He is the Maker of everything, the Lord of heaven and earth.

**Paul's second article: 2, WHAT GOD IS NOT.** a) He does not live in temples built by humans. b) He does not require service from humans, as if he needs anything from us. c) And this is because he is not the beggar or the receiver in our relationship, but the Giver, the giver of life and breath and everything else ("breath" in Greek is connected to the word "Spirit," and so Paul has opened the door here to the doctrine of the Trinity. But the Athenian Catechism is "today's lesson." Paul has to leave quite a bit as a lesson for another day). But for now he moves to his central Third Article:

**3, WHAT GOD HAS DONE.** Well, what has God done? a) He made every nation from one man, b) he determined the time and place where we each will live. Why? c) So that mankind would be able to seek him, reach out for him and find him.

And to make his point, this is where Paul quotes some Greek poets: "For in him we live and move and have our being," and "We are his offspring." Paul uses these quotations from Greek writers to draw his listeners in within his fourth article:

**4, WHAT THIS PROVES ABOUT GOD.** a) We, mankind, we are God's offspring. And if he is Father, then b) he is not made of stone or anything like that. And c) up to now, he has overlooked such ignorance. But now...

**Paul's final article: 5, WHAT GOD WANTS AND OFFERS (which is revealed in Jesus, risen from the dead).** a) Is first of all, repentance over sin, b) second, Judgment Day is coming,

and will be carried out by Christ, the man he has appointed, and c) this is proved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

In this little catechism of faith, Paul tears apart the beliefs of atheists, showing that the pagans are closer to knowing the true God, by searching for God in some way. But then he also exposes the sinful beliefs of the pagans by showing that even their faith, if followed truly, should have pointed them to the true God and not to statues made by human hands. Then Paul confronts even the Jews, who knew the true God but in many cases in his time rejected Jesus Christ, and yet Christ's divinity is proved by the resurrection.

And Paul also pricks my conscience and perhaps yours, too, by showing us that there is no one we cannot confront with the law of God that exposes our sins. We don't always need to poke at every single sin the first time we talk about Jesus. Which Philosopher at the Areopagus did Paul single out to condemn his adultery, his homosexuality, his abusive rantings at home, his neglect of his animals, or the way he manipulated the books so that his business would be more profitable? All of these things are sins, but we don't change hearts with a club, or with a sword, or with a law that is devoid of Jesus.

It is Jesus we proclaim so that his word will do all of the heavy lifting: condemning sin and comforting the frightened that there is still hope for them.

Paul's Athenian Catechism teaches us that it is impossible to become righteous before God our Creator by our own words or works. The God who made everything, who made us to search for him, the one who laid down the laws and the standards by which we are measured is the one who will be our Judge in the end, and without repentance over our sins, there is no hope of escaping the Judgment or of surviving it. Remember that Paul is teaching Greek Philosophers who had never before heard of Jesus Christ, and he has already, in three paragraphs, condemned them for their self-righteous opinions of themselves. They have been shown that they cannot stand before God, but that there is one hope.

The Judge, the man God has appointed to judge us all, is the same man who rose from the dead. Paul has given the Athenians everything that they need to put their faith in Jesus, and Paul has reminded us that:

There is not one good deed that will do anything to change our status before God. We cannot lead such an honorable or virtuous life that it would merit one hour in heaven. All of the things we do, offered on their own merits, earn for us instead nothing but condemnation in hell. And yet the Risen Jesus had taken us up, so that, devoid of anything but himself, and bearing nothing but his forgiveness, his righteousness, we have everything we need to stand before God's hour of Judgment and be carried into everlasting life.

Now, this Athenian Catechism is nothing more than the first lesson our children learn when they take their Christian instruction, but it is enough. It is Christ alone who makes all the difference in the world, whether I am a Greek philosopher or an American citizen. Let Jesus Christ, the Jesus we proclaim, fill your heart today and always, and be at peace. Amen.