

Getting To Know The Unknown God

Introduction. In this age of liberalism, skepticism, rationalism, mysticism, pragmatism, emotionalism, experimentalism, psychology, and man-centered theology, the church desperately needs a proper perspective of God.

As a Hellenized Jew, Paul had been exposed to Greek culture with its outstanding traditions in art and philosophy. Athens was the center of that culture. In its heyday, several centuries before Christ, it had been the greatest city in the world. Socrates, his brilliant student Plato, and Plato's student Aristotle, perhaps the greatest and most influential philosopher of all time, taught there. So also did Epicurus, founder of Epicureanism, and Zeno, founder of Stoicism, two dominant philosophies. By Paul's day, Corinth had replaced Athens as the most important political and commercial center in Greece. Yet Athens had lost none of its cultural significance, was still the philosophical center of the ancient world, and was the home of the world's most famous university (Plato's Academy). Athens was also a religious center, where almost every god in existence was worshiped. Every public building was dedicated to a god, and statues of gods filled the city.

The Areopagus was a court, so named for the hill on which it had once met. The power of that tribunal had fluctuated over the centuries but in Roman times was considerable. Paul was not formally tried before this court (which several centuries earlier had condemned Socrates), but he was informally required to give an account of his teaching. A study of that teaching can increase our faith in our wicked age tremendously.

I. ***Recognizing That God Is***

- A. The Athenians had taken the first step toward knowing God in that they were supernaturalists. It is obviously impossible for those who deny God's existence to know Him (Hebrews 11:6).
- B. The Bible does not formally argue God's existence; it is ultimately a matter of revelation and faith (John 1:18; 20:29). It is true that while God's existence is not provable in the sense of a scientific experiment or a mathematical equation, it is logical in our world.
 1. The law of cause and effect argues for God's existence.
 - a) Common sense dictates that every effect must have a cause. Yet there cannot be an endless chain of such causes. Therefore, there must be an uncaused first cause. This is the cosmological argument.
 - b) The Bible acknowledges the cause and effect principle (Hebrews 3:4). A house requires an efficient cause; it would be absurd to put a pile of building material in the path of a tornado and expect the storm to assemble a house. How much more absurd

is it to imagine that our immensely complex universe had no first cause?

2. Nature also displays remarkable evidence of design.
 - a) Biologist Michael Pitman wrote, "Through any but blinkered eyes the biological world shows clear signs of planning and order." From the baffling complexity of the cell, to the miraculous transformation of caterpillars into butterflies, to the precise engineering of the earth to support life, examples of design are everywhere.
 - (1) The Lady's Slipper Orchid is an example of a 2-stamen orchid. As the name implies, the lip is very distinctive, being shaped like a shoe or slipper. The inside of the lip is very smooth and this, together with the inrolled edges, prevents the easy departure of an insect by the same way in which it came.
 - (2) Instead, it is forced by the shape of the lip and the nature of the surface to move towards the back, or point of attachment, where there are two small exits. In order to gain these exists, the insect must first pass beneath a stigma and then brush past one or the other of the two stamens, which deposits pollen onto it, after which it is free to fly off.
 - (3) Because of this set-up, cross pollination occurs very efficiently. The complexity of interaction between plant and insect is truly staggering and, for those who will see, it clearly bears the imprint of the all-wise Creator.
 - b) A plan requires a planner, a program requires a programmer, and design requires a designer. That is the essence of the teleological argument: the order and complexity of the universe could not have arisen by random chance. Intelligence comes from intelligence, moral judgment from a moral being (Psalm 94:9).
3. Atheism appeals to people who wish to avoid judgment for their sinful lifestyle. Romans 1:18-23 makes clear that the matter of rejecting God is willful and due to the love of sin. Into the confusion caused by conflicting philosophies and idolatry, Paul spoke forcefully the truth that the one true God not only exists but can also be known.

II. ***Recognizing Who God Is***

A. Creator.

1. The assertion that God made the world was a powerful truth. It ran contrary to the Epicureans, who believed matter was eternal and therefore had no Creator, and to the Stoics, who as pantheists

believed everything was part of God -- who certainly could not have created Himself.

2. The prevailing explanation by the ungodly for the origin of the universe is evolution. It is taught dogmatically by zealous adherents as a scientific fact as firmly established as the law of gravity. Yet evolution is not even a scientific theory (since it is not observable, repeatable, or testable), let alone an established fact.
3. There is impressive scientific evidence against evolution.
 - a) The second law of thermodynamics shows that evolution is theoretically impossible.
 - (1) The second law of thermodynamics, one of the most well-established principles in all of science, states that the natural tendency is for everything to go from a more ordered to a less ordered state.
 - (2) Noted atheist Isaac Asimov acknowledged that "as far as we know, all changes are in the direction of increasing entropy, of increasing disorder, of increasing randomness, of running down."
 - (3) Yet, incredibly, evolutionists argue that precisely the opposite has happened. According to them, things have gone from a less ordered state to a more ordered one.
 - b) The fossil record shows evolution in fact did not take place.
 - (1) The only way to determine if evolution has happened is to examine the fossil record, which contains the history of life on earth. Although presented in popular literature and textbooks as proof for evolution, the fossil record is actually a major source of embarrassment for evolutionists.
 - (2) The countless transitional forms demanded by evolution are not found. David Kitts of the University of Oklahoma admits, "Despite the bright promise that paleontology provides a means of 'seeing' evolution, it has presented some nasty difficulties for evolutionists the most notorious of which is the presence of 'gaps' in the fossil record. Evolution requires intermediate forms between species and paleontology does not provide them."
 - (3) Even Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard University, perhaps the most well-known contemporary defender of evolution, candidly admits, "The extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the trade secret of paleontology. The evolutionary trees that adorn our textbooks have data only at the tips and nodes of their branches; the rest is inference, however reasonable, not the evidence of the fossils."

(4) W. R. Fix noted that one critical reason for the conflicts is that the human fossil record is still so sparse “that those who insist on positive declarations can do nothing more than jump from one hazardous surmise to another and hope that the next dramatic discovery does not make them utter fools ... Clearly, some people refuse to learn from this. As we have seen, there are numerous scientists and popularizers today who have the temerity to tell us that there is ‘no doubt’ how man originated. If only they had the evidence.” In fact, a review of the history of paleoanthropology shows that the discipline is far less objective than that of physics, chemistry, or even biology. The field is rife with controversy and fraud, including outright faking.

c) Paul’s affirmation that God made the world is supported by the Bible (Psalm 146:5-6; Isaiah 40:28; 45:18; Jeremiah 10:12; 32:17; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11; 10:6). So many merely see God as a remote first cause, who set in motion the evolutionary process and can make no claim on anyone’s life. When preaching to the Jews, Paul began with the Old Testament scriptures; but with the Gentiles, he began with an explanation of the first cause.

B. Ruler.

1. Genesis 14:19 describes God as the “possessor of heaven and earth” (Psalm 24:1). Humbled by God’s devastating judgment on him, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was forced to admit that God rules in the kingdoms of men (Daniel 4:34-35).
2. The God who created the heavens and the earth obviously does not need a physical place in which to dwell (1 Kings 8:27; cf. Psalm 139:1-12). The folly of idolatry is most clearly seen in its denial of God’s infinity.

C. Giver.

1. Paul also deals with the absurdity of imagining that God needs to be served by human hands (Job 22:2-3; Psalm 50:9-12).
2. Far from needing anything from men, He gives life and breath to everything on earth (Psalm 104:14-15; Romans 11:36). God blesses all men, even the most hardened sinners, with the benefits of common grace (Matthew 5:45; James 1:17).

D. Controller.

1. God is not only the sovereign ruler of the universe but also the controller of the affairs and destinies of men and nations.
2. All men are equal, because all were created by God. Paul’s statement was a blow to the national pride of the Greeks, who scornfully called non-Greeks “barbarians.”

3. God determined the rise and fall of the nations (Daniel 2:36-45; Luke 21:24). He also set the boundaries of nations, determining the extent of their conquests (Deuteronomy 32:8; Isaiah 10:12-15).

E. Revealer.

1. God's providential activity as creator, ruler, giver, and controller should move men to seek Him. Logic should send them from the greatest effect back to the first cause. In all that He has done in creating and sustaining the universe, God has revealed Himself to mankind. Such self-disclosure should encourage men to seek Him and find Him.
2. The Greeks could not plead ignorance. Even their poets acknowledged the revelation of God in nature, though they wrongly saw it as a revelation of their false gods. The Cretan poet Epimendes noted that we move and breath in God, while Aratus added that we are His offspring.
3. If God created man, He must be more than a mere man-made idol. Paul used quotes from their own poets to highlight to his audience the absurdity of idolatry. The best starting point for evangelizing pagans with no knowledge of the scripture is to explain the power and Person behind the creation. Satan's invention of evolution cuts off that path of reason that leads to God.

III. ***Recognizing What God Said***

- A. To recognize that God exists, and even understand who He is, will not lead one to be saved in and of itself. Natural revelation is insufficient to save, merely serving to draw men to God. An understanding of special revelation is critically needed.
- B. The coming of Christ brought about a change in God's dealing with humanity. God did not always intervene with special judgments (though sin always caused consequences) against the nations who did not know Him.
- C. The resurrection of Jesus Christ showed God's approval of Him, and qualified Him as judge (John 5:22-27). There are no excuses now -- the proof of the word of the Lord is all in. Sinners will be judged by what they do with that truth. There is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Conclusion. The response to Paul's message was predictable, considering the contempt his hearers had previously expressed toward him. Paul's apologetic for Christ was not entirely ignored. Luke notes that some men joined with him and believed. They not only recognized God's existence and who He is but also took the final step and listened to what He said to

them through His messenger. Because of that, they alone came to know the "unknown God."