

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 18

Acts 17

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Keener, Acts, Session 18, Acts 17, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener examines Acts 17, focusing on Paul's experiences in Berea and Athens. He details Paul's interactions with various philosophical groups, including Epicureans and Stoics, highlighting how Paul adapted his message to their beliefs while maintaining core Christian tenets. Keener emphasizes Paul's skillful use of common ground and existing philosophical concepts to present the Gospel effectively. The lecture also explores the historical and cultural context of Athens, referencing ancient sources like Pausanias to enrich the narrative. Finally, it discusses the mixed reception Paul received, emphasizing that some embraced the Gospel while others remained unconvinced.

2. 17 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Keener, Acts, Session 18 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Gospels – Acts → Acts).



**Keener_Acts_Session
18.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Briefing Doc: Acts 17 - Paul in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens (Keener Lecture)

Source: Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Lecture 18, Acts 17

Main Themes:

- Paul's missionary journey and the varying responses he encounters.
- The importance of contextualization in preaching the Gospel.
- Paul's engagement with Greek philosophy and its limitations.
- The centrality of the resurrection in Paul's message and its clash with Greek thought.

Key Ideas & Facts:

Thessalonica and Berea:

- Paul faced hostility in Thessalonica but planted a church.
- In Berea, the Jews were more receptive, "searched the scriptures," and some believed.
- Luke highlights the role of women in the Berean church.
- Thessalonian Jews pursued Paul to Berea, forcing him to flee to Athens.

Athens and Greek Philosophy:

- Athens was renowned for philosophy but steeped in idolatry.
- Paul's spirit was "stirred" by the city's spiritual state.
- The lecture provides an overview of Epicurean and Stoic philosophies, highlighting their key tenets and influence.
- It emphasizes that while some philosophical ideas resonated with Christian thought (divine design, providence), they ultimately fell short of the Gospel.

Paul at the Areopagus:

- Paul was accused of introducing foreign gods, an allusion to Socrates' trial.
- He cleverly used the Athenian altar to an "unknown god" as a starting point.
- Paul's speech showcased skillful contextualization:

- He initially found common ground, praising their religiosity and acknowledging God's self-sufficiency (a concept shared by Stoics).
- He utilized Greek poets like Epimenides and Aratus, familiar to his audience.
- However, Paul ultimately challenged their worldview by calling for repentance and proclaiming the resurrection, which was met with mockery and rejection.
- "He's introducing foreign gods...Because Paul has been preaching to them...Jesus and Anastasis...They don't understand what Paul is saying."
- "Why does Paul save this for the end? Well, because whenever he says it, that's the end. They're not going to listen to him for the rest."

Results and Reflections:

- Despite the largely negative response, Paul gained some converts, including Dionysius, an Areopagite.
- The lecture stresses the importance of finding common ground while remaining true to the core message of the Gospel, even when it's unpopular.
- It emphasizes that contextualization makes the Gospel understandable, not necessarily agreeable.

Quotes:

- "Paul is going to divide and conquer among his hearers...He gets the Pharisees...well, there's nothing wrong with this guy, he's just preaching the resurrection."
- "God doesn't need these temples...He also said...God doesn't need to be served with human hands."
- "Paul goes very far in making contact with his culture...We each need to see how we can make the gospel relevant in our context..."
- "They accepted the idea of conversion to philosophy...But probably the kind of repentance he's speaking of, they would have to repudiate other gods."
- "God is going to judge the world through a man whom he's appointed, and he's given evidence to everybody...by raising him from the dead...No, that's when he lost them. But he couldn't compromise it. That's the gospel."

Overall, the lecture provides a rich analysis of Paul's encounter with Greek culture and thought, highlighting the challenges and opportunities of contextualization in proclaiming the Gospel.

4. Acts Study Guide: Session 18, Acts 17

Acts 17: Paul in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens

Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each.

1. Why did Paul leave Thessalonica for Berea?
2. How did the Bereans respond to Paul's message compared to the Thessalonians?
3. What was the significance of mentioning women among the Berean believers?
4. Why did some Athenians label Paul a "spermalagos"?
5. What were the primary philosophical schools represented in Athens during Paul's visit?
6. What was the Epicurean view of the gods and the aim of life?
7. What were the main differences between the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies?
8. Why was Paul brought before the Areopagus?
9. What strategy did Paul use to connect with his Athenian audience?
10. How did Paul challenge the Athenian understanding of idols and the nature of God?

Answer Key

1. Paul left Thessalonica for Berea to escape persecution from hostile Jews who opposed his message. Berea offered a safer location and a distance from those seeking to harm him.
2. The Bereans responded to Paul's message with more openness and intellectual curiosity than the Thessalonians. They listened attentively and examined the Scriptures to verify his teachings.
3. Mentioning women among the Berean believers is significant because it highlights Luke's interest in the role of women in the early Christian movement, showcasing their active participation in receiving and spreading the Gospel.
4. Some Athenians labeled Paul a "spermalagos," a term for someone who picked up bits and pieces of knowledge without depth or substance, because they perceived his teachings as a collection of foreign ideas without a solid foundation.

5. The primary philosophical schools represented in Athens during Paul's visit were the Epicureans and the Stoics. These schools held contrasting views on the nature of the gods, the purpose of life, and the role of pleasure and virtue.
6. Epicureans believed that the gods, if they existed, were distant and unconcerned with human affairs. They saw the pursuit of pleasure, defined as the absence of pain and trouble, as the ultimate aim of life.
7. Stoics, unlike Epicureans, emphasized virtue as the highest ideal, viewing pleasure as a vice. They believed in a divinely ordered universe governed by logos (reason) and believed in divine providence. Unlike the Epicurean pursuit of individual pleasure, Stoics focused on living in harmony with the rational order of the cosmos.
8. Paul was brought before the Areopagus, the high court of Athens, likely for evaluation. The philosophers and city leaders sought to determine the legitimacy of his teachings and whether he should be allowed to continue speaking publicly.
9. Paul connected with his Athenian audience by first acknowledging their religiosity and finding common ground through their shared belief in an "unknown God." He then used this concept to introduce them to the God of the Bible. He further connected by quoting Greek poets, demonstrating his engagement with their culture.
10. Paul challenged the Athenian understanding of idols by arguing that God, as the creator of all, is not confined to temples or represented by statues. He contrasted their perception of God with the biblical God who is personal, active in history, and requires repentance and faith.

Essay Questions

1. Compare and contrast the responses to Paul's message in Thessalonica and Berea. What factors might have contributed to the differences in reception?
2. Analyze Paul's speech at the Areopagus. How did he adapt his message to his audience and what were his primary arguments for the existence and nature of God?
3. Discuss the role of contextualization in Paul's ministry. How did he strive to make the Gospel relevant to his diverse audiences without compromising its core message?

4. What were the main points of conflict between Paul's message and the prevailing philosophies of the Epicureans and Stoics? How did Paul address these points of disagreement?
5. Assess the significance of Paul's encounter in Athens for our understanding of the early Christian mission to the Gentile world. What challenges and opportunities did this encounter present?

Glossary of Key Terms

Areopagus: The high court of Athens, known for its role in trying Socrates. In Paul's time, it also functioned as a body overseeing public discourse and education.

Epicureanism: A philosophical school founded by Epicurus, emphasizing pleasure, defined as the absence of pain and trouble, as the highest good and advocating for a life free from disturbance.

Spermalogos: A derogatory term meaning "seed-picker" or "babbler," used to describe someone who superficially gathers bits of knowledge without true understanding.

Stoicism: A philosophical school founded by Zeno of Citium, emphasizing virtue as the highest good and advocating for living in accordance with nature, which is understood as divinely ordered by logos (reason).

Via Egnatia: A major Roman road connecting the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire, passing through Thessalonica and Philippi.

Contextualization: The process of adapting the presentation of the Gospel to different cultures and contexts to make it more understandable and relevant without compromising its essential truth.

5. FAQs on Keener, Acts, Session 18, Acts 17, Biblelearning.org (BeL)

Acts 17 FAQ

Why did Paul go to Berea?

Paul went to Berea to escape persecution in Thessalonica. Berea was 60 miles west of Thessalonica and off the main road (Via Ignatia), making it a safer location.

How did the people of Berea respond to Paul's message?

The people of Berea were more receptive to Paul's message than those in Thessalonica. They listened attentively and studied the scriptures to verify his teachings. This positive response highlights the importance of engaging with God's Word.

What role did philosophy play in Athens?

Athens was known for its philosophy. While philosophers in this period focused more on ethics than metaphysics, many saw religion as superstition and the gods as irrelevant to human life. There were various schools of thought, with the Stoics being the most popular.

What was the Areopagus, and why was Paul brought there?

The Areopagus was the high court of Athens. Philosophers brought Paul there, likely to evaluate his teachings and determine if he should be allowed to continue speaking publicly. This encounter echoes the trial of Socrates, who was condemned by the Areopagus for introducing new deities.

How did Paul approach his Athenian audience?

Paul began by commending the Athenians for their religious zeal, finding common ground with their belief in an "unknown God." He used this cultural reference to introduce the true God, emphasizing His self-sufficiency and role as Creator. Paul even quoted Greek poets to connect with his audience.

What key differences emerged between Paul's message and Greek philosophy?

A major point of divergence was the concept of repentance. While philosophers accepted conversion to a philosophical school, Paul's call for repentance involved turning away from false gods and embracing the true God. Additionally, the resurrection of Jesus was a stumbling block for the Greeks, who found the idea of bodily resurrection unappealing.

What were the results of Paul's preaching in Athens?

Despite the cultural and philosophical barriers, Paul's preaching in Athens was not entirely fruitless. Luke records that Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris became believers. This demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit to work even in challenging environments.

What is the significance of Paul's contextualization in Athens?

Paul's approach in Athens provides a valuable lesson in contextualization. He sought to understand his audience's culture and worldview, using familiar concepts and language to present the Gospel. While remaining faithful to the core message of Christ, Paul demonstrated the importance of adapting communication styles to effectively engage with diverse audiences.