

# Combating The Relativization Of Scripture

## Lesson Five

### The Wisdom of Man: Tip Of The Spear

**Text: Acts 17:16 – 34**

*BASIC CONTEXT:*

1. The apostle Paul has arrived in the city of Athens. It is a city known for its philosophers and its religions. Many ideas and conceptions had their genesis in the environs of this place.
2. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with Paul (Acts 17:18). Perhaps they found the gospel message intriguing. At any rate, these people detected that he was proclaiming a message with content that was beyond their knowledge.
3. According to verse 19, Paul was escorted to the Areopagus. It was at that place that these inquisitive types met regularly to philosophize.
4. In that environment and amid such a company, this herald of the gospel began to impart the message of eternal salvation in Christ.
5. Paul reasoned with these people on the basis of what the Lord had done in history and particularly through Jesus Christ.
6. The gospel preacher makes a point of isolating the fact of human “ignorance” (v. 29 – 31). These things that are being proclaimed in their hearing can only be known by a revelation from the God who is. No amount of nor quality of human reasoning could ever come to discover the nature of God and God’s agenda for the human race. Such truths can only be had by a word from the Lord.
7. The point of Paul’s message is that God is sitting in judgment of the human race; and the human race is not in a position to sit in judgment upon God.

*RELATIVIZATION INDEX:*

**Human Wisdom:**

- a. These people are professional or at least full-time appraisers of ideas. “All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (v. 21).

- b. Paul's beginning point is the reality of that which is eternal; that, therefore, cannot register to the five senses. "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 hands" (v. 24).
- c. He was listened to in an uninterrupted way until "the resurrection of the dead" (v. 32) was revealed as a principal truth of the message.
- d. "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject'" (v. 32).
- e. The gospel message aims directly at the intelligence of man. Our intelligence is the only significant opponent of that which has been revealed. Human wisdom insists that it alone is the beginning point for serious human consideration of any point. The guest on Mars Hill is suggesting that human wisdom is not the starting point at all. This element in the gospel proclamation would be calculated to elicit a vigorous response from the hearers gathered there that day.
- f. Paul indicates that it is human wisdom that has spawned all of these false religions and approaches to the eternal reality. "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 man's design and skill" (v. 29). If God is the creator of all things, then it cannot follow that this God is in any way like what human wisdom has depicted in its own designs and images. God is the creator of man, and therefore man is not the creator of God. Human wisdom is out of its league!
- g. Acts 17 does not in any way suggest that there exists, nor that there can exist, any common meeting point between the word of God and human wisdom. One will succumb to the other. There is no middle ground.
- h. Human wisdom and all of its accumulated habits are now being judged by the living God, Paul says. "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (v. 31).
- i. Human wisdom begins with itself and then makes all ideas relative to it. If certain ideas are amenable to human intelligence, then well and good. But if those ideas run afoul of human wisdom, then they are to be considered as refuse.
- j. In terms of the relativization effect, human wisdom is the tip of the spear. Unless men are willing to relinquish their hold on their own wisdom in favor of the intervention of God into history and language, then salvation will always be far from them (or better said – far from us).
- k. The specific element that causes friction between human wisdom and the gospel message is the Resurrection. Human wisdom cannot account for this aspect of our religion. The Resurrection is expected then to meet human criteria. However,

the gospel makes it clear that it is human wisdom that must come under the scrutiny of that which has been revealed through the work of God the Father, the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ the resurrected one. For “He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (v. 31b).

- l. Human intellectual history is knitted together by the common thread of human wisdom. This problem begins in Genesis 3 and never abates in all of our history on the earth and in time.
- m. For much of time the Bible has suffered abuse and misuse in the shadow of human wisdom. On the basis of the testimony of human wisdom the word of God has been demoted from its status as a revelation to nothing more than a religious document, or perhaps a limited view of history.
- n. Human wisdom has many manifestations. Interpretation, or what is called hermeneutics, is one of them. Common to interpretation as a reading of the text of the Scripture is the beginning point of human intelligence. This needs to be reversed in favor of the starting point of the grammatical structure of the revelation.
- o. In fact, human wisdom needs to be supplanted by the content supplied to the mind by the words of the Bible. Human intelligence is assigned a place downstream from the word of God. It can in no way precede it.
- p. There are many examples in both the Old Testament and the New Testament where human wisdom was raised above the expressed word of God. Every time that that happened sin was incurred. Psalm 78 is a treatise on this subject. Human wisdom is the tip of the spear when it comes to disloyal reasoning and thinking. The tip of the spear stands pointed at the integrity of the word of God and faith. Human wisdom is at the forefront of the assault on Scripture.

#### **INTELLECTUAL TRADITION:**

- a. The Epicurean and the Stoics (v.18) were there on the Areopagus for this encounter with Paul, perhaps along with others. These are intellectual traditions.
- b. Their proponents and their students would have steeped themselves in habits of mind relative to those schools of thought. But these intellectual traditions cannot account for the reality of the Incarnation of Christ, nor for the most important event in human history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Human wisdom, Paul says, has been eclipsed by the work of God the Creator in human history.
- c. Intellectual traditions are simply brushed aside by the presence of God and His mighty influence over the affairs of men. “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 hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (v. 24 - 26).
- d. Sooner or later all intellectual traditions taught by, maintained by, men will meet their defeat at the hands of the active God over history. “For he has set a day when he will judge the world...” (v. 31).
  - e. Romans 1:1 – 32 tell of the wholesale abandonment of the revelation of God in favor of all sorts of intellectual traditions that have not helped man in his quest for betterment. Far from betterment, intellectual traditions at variance with the Scriptures have plunged man into darkness, danger and degradation.

*THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISCOURSE: This passage shows how people chose between two poles.*

- a. **A DISCOURSE THAT TRIES TO RELATIVIZE SCRIPTURE.** Most of the philosophers who heard the gospel did not respond well, according to the passage. A few did respond in favorable ways. The majority reacted with a discourse that would have relativized all that had been preached to them that day. Their discourse could not have reconciled what they heard with human wisdom. “Myth,” “fiction,” “pure baloney” would have been terms that resounded from the lips of many. Discourse that attempts to relativize the gospel expresses the impossibility of the revealed truth.
- b. **A DISCOURSE SHAPED BY THE REVELATION OF THE LORD.** “...Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and number of others” (v. 34) “believed.” This necessarily means that their discourse was relativized by what they had just heard. The truth of Christ and the Resurrection had overwhelmed their own wisdom and their history with certain intellectual traditions. All thinking and perceiving at that point they knew had to change. No “sneering” (v. 32) -- only belief was their response. For them the world, the universe, history had changed. Christ was above all -- even their discourse.

### *QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION*

1. What does the text say motivated the people who regularly gathered on the Areopagus?
2. In what way(s) are the motivations of people today similar to those of Paul’s audience in this story? Do you feel yourself subject to some of the same motivations? If so, give examples.

3. What evidence from our text shows that Paul's listeners relativized their understanding of cosmology (how the world "works") to human intelligence?
4. What would Paul's listeners have said was the basis for their discourse? How would they have regarded Paul's statement that they were working on the basis of ignorance, not information?
5. How did the message of Paul "sweep away" intellectual tradition?
6. Give an example from this text of how Paul showed the Aeropagus listeners that God relativizes:
  - a. HISTORY
  - b. CULTURE
  - c. RACE
  - d. TIME
7. In what specific ways has this lesson revealed to you your own tendencies to relativize the message of God to elements of your own experience, wisdom, human tradition, or other elements of the indices?
8. What made Dionysius, Damaris, and others "different"? What would have their discourse been like, when describing what had happened on the Aeropagus?
9. Think of a situation you're facing where you're tempted to relativize the Word of God and His power to something else. What did you learn from Paul's lesson that might help you with your own personal discourse?