

Athens of the Apostle Paul

Acts 17:16-34

Many gods under one name: They say a rose called by any other name is still a rose. So also, is anything else. It matters little what you call something; it is what it is. When the Apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul of Tarsus, was approaching the city of Athens, "his spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the city full of idols" (Acts 17:16). The city of Athens was noted for its idols. Some have reported that idols exceeded the number of people: "This was a city that was entirely different from any that Paul had ever visited or was to visit. It is often described as a university town that was similar to those cities of our day that have great universities located in their midst; but this conception is misleading in more ways than one. It was the world center of art, but an art that was devoted chiefly to the idolatries of Greek mythology. Its great attraction today is the ruined Parthenon with the Erechtheion on the far left and two amphitheaters far below on the right. Sculpture, Greek architecture, Greek theaters, schools of philosophies, literates of all kinds, all steeped in Greek paganism — this was Athens as Paul saw it in A. D. 52. This is what the pagan Lucian has in mind, 'When I first came to Athens I was astonished and delighted to see all the glory of the city.' Pagan writers remark regarding the plethora of temples and statues. Petronius satirically remarks that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. In his fine description Pausanias states that Athens had more images than all Greece put together. Xenophon calls Athens 'one great altar, one great offering to the gods.' Livy writes, 'In Athens are to be seen images of gods and men of all descriptions and made of all materials.' In the Agora every god of the Olympus found a place. Every public building was at the same time a sanctuary that was dedicated to one or more gods. Besides the ordinary gods there were deifications of Fame, Modesty, Energy, Persuasion, etc." (Acts of the Apostle, R. C. H. Lenski). It appears that the city of Athens housed every idol imaginable to the mind of man. Even to the point of erecting an "altar with this inscription, To an Unknown God" (Acts 17:23). If we were to take a moment to consider the condition of the city, we should not be astonished at the findings. When we look at religion in our own society, we see the same to be true. In many instances, they all profess to follow the same God, yet, by virtue of doctrine and practice, a person can see that our society serves many gods, under the guise of the one true God. ret