THE ATHENIAN WAY

By Al Diestelkamp

The inspired description of the philosophers in Athens encountered by the apostle Paul is that they “spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Ac. 17:21). I get the impression that this characterization was not a compliment, but the apostle Paul took advantage of it and grasped the opportunity to reveal something truly “new” to them as he preached the gospel. The results were that some mocked, some wanted to hear more, and some believed (17:32, 34).
 While I wouldn’t dare accuse my brethren of spending their time in “nothing else,” I sometimes think that some may have embraced a touch of the Athenian way. I understand the excitement one experiences when discovering something that he has not previously realized or heard before. I get it! I also know that there is benefit in hearing out viewpoints from those who present something that is new to me or varies from long-standing thought or conviction.
 In reality, since “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God…that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17), there is nothing really “new” to discover other than what we have previously overlooked or misunderstood. Therefore, if we discover something new to us, it better be from something old and unchangeable—the Word of God.
 When looking for something new, the tendency is to “look between the lines” of the biblical text. This is where speculation is born. The tendency is to determine what Jesus or the Holy Spirit is *thinking* rather than what is actually said or written. Then instead of offering the new “understanding” as a possible alternative to the literal interpretation, it is often dogmatically presented as fact.  In other cases, the search for something new is prompted by dissatisfaction with the old. One may read something in Scripture that is a “hard saying,” and think, “Surely there’s some other explanation!” So the search begins for a way to circumvent the obvious. Such is the case with one brother who admitted that he couldn’t believe Jesus really meant what it seems He was saying regarding divorce and remarriage and set out to find another answer. He was so excited to find his desired “answer” in uninspired writings of Jewish Rabbis that he wrote a whole book appealing to historical context to negate what was otherwise apparent in the Lord’s wording.
 The search for some new interpretation of Scripture just for the sake of finding something different from popular thought or in an attempt to explain away a literal meaning not to our liking is not edifying. Sometimes popular thought is accurate, and words often mean just what they say.

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