Acts XVIII, 22. "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' Hill, and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.'

It is my intention to pursue the passage of sacred history, on which we entered this morning. We have already followed the detail of St. Paul's visit at Athens, till we found him carried to Areopagus. Not probably for trial, but to explain and defend in a public place his new doctrines. From this point we resume the thread of the story, with the fine address that Paul made on the occasion, as he stood in the midst of Mars Hill. As by the way is only another expression for the term Areopagus. This speech we now proceed to consider.

The first circumstance that attracts our attention is the presence, with which St. Paul begins his address to the Athenians. They were assembled under circumstances of strong excitement and eager expectation. The Apostle knew full well that if he would secure their attention, he must not commence with raising their expectations.
of exciting their prejudices. He therefore introduces his speech by commending their superfluous care about the outward means of worship... "I perceive, says he, that in all things ye are very religious." for so the expression should be rendered, or not. "I perceive that ye are too superstitious," as it stands in our translation. The original word may be taken in a good or bad sense; but the translation "very religious" instead of "too superstitious" seems more appropriate and natural, for it is not to be supposed that the Apostle would, at the very outset of so important a speech on so important an occasion, use the word in so odious a sense, as to excite the indignation of every Athenian, or arm against himself at once every feeling of hostility or scorn. I do not suppose by any means, that when the Apostle compliments the Athenians on being very religious, he intends to praise them for the piety or religion. He means merely to give them the credit of being very exact and careful about their altars, rites, and the externals of religious things. They were very attentive to their gods, imaginary or real as those gods were; if they were minute and scrupulous enough in this respect, for a purer or better religion. In a proof of this, he observes that as he passed by a behel
their images or altars, he found an altar bearing this inscription to the unknown God. The altar of which St. Paul here speaks, has been the subject of much speculation and investigation among critics. The deficiency of historical information leaves us in doubt as to the origin of object of this altar. These monuments to the viles of visionary deities of heathenism were doubtless very numerous in Athens; it is not, therefore, wonderful that at this distance, we should know so little about that altar bore the inscription to the unknown God.

It has been ingeniously conjectured, that in very ancient times, when the art of writing was unknown, numerous altars were erected at Athens, on which of course there were no inscriptions, so that in after ages the Athenians would not destroy these remnants of antiquity, lest they should provoke the anger of some divinity, of being insensate to what deity they were consecrated; they inscribed upon them this sentence - to the unknown God. One of these altars, it is supposed, was seen by St. Paul, gave occasion to his remark in allusion to it. But a more general opinion is, that this altar was erected by the later Athenians, out of abundant caution, lest some deity should be neglected. The city
was once visited by a most grievous pestilence... the ravages of
which became so extensive and deadly, that they ascribed it
to the vengeance of some offended god. Still they were in
doubt, who this incensed divinity could be... for they
had altars and sacrifices for every deity, that they could
invent, or had the means of knowing. In this dilemma,
they were advised by one of their philosophers to build
an altar to offer sacrifices to the god, whoever he might
be... who sent the pestilence. They followed this advice
and erected an altar to whom they knew not... and therefore
they marked it with the inscription: to the unknown
god... that one deity might be incensed without being neg-
lected... But whichever of these opinions we adopt, it
will evince that compulsive care to please the gods... St.
Paul accords to them... though at the same time
it will display such hordes of gross errors, as one is almost
surprised, certainly shocked, to find among the refined
inhabitants of Athens... They were as soliciters not to
offend their gods, as if they had been real beings, where
whom they ought to have feared to offend... and
their scrupuloseness in this respect must put to the
blush many a stern who dwells in the holy light of
the Gospel...
Having thus opened the way by securing their attention and goodwill, the Apostle announces, that he was going to declare to them this unknown God, whom they in ignorance worshipped, of whose vast and mighty wisdom, eternity, he introduces the true and living God into the scene. Jehovah was to them indeed an unknown God, of the Apostle was earnestly desirous to make them acquainted with One so vastly superior to all the vain beings they had hitherto worshipped.

His speech on the occasion was appropriate to their situation, well adapted to meet and correct their errors. He proclaims to them the true God, as the omnipotent, benevolent, and uncontrolled Sovereign of the universe; this grand, mighty idea would sweep away, as with one blow, all their pagentry of vain gods, useless, unmeaning worship...

"God," says the eloquent Paul, "God who made the world and all things therein, seeing He is of heavendeth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." Such a sentence as this, containing so grand a mighty a truth, yet a truth so common, even that it
is familiar to the minds of children, was probably never uttered in Athens before. Who does not recognize in this declaration, with which the Ap. begins his description of the true God, an allusion to scenes before him? Athens was the city of proud, magnificent temples; but the two messengers assure them that God dwelleth not in temples made with hands. Imagine yourself standing on an eminence in the midst of this city, as you gazed on the prospect, your eye resting everywhere on these on foot of glittering structures, as if were a monument to the taste of any of the people, who have been the wonder of admiration of succeeding ages. 

Then imagine yourself of the ardent Apostle lifting up his voice in the midst of these polished idolaters, declaring with a deep feeling of awe, that God, the true God, dwelleth not in human temples. Who does not see, how striking and powerful must have been the effect of this allusion to present objects, objects too of which the Athenians felt proud. The Ap. broke in upon these associations, and make religion so much a matter of the fancy of the head, instead of being demanding for the Spirit of the heart,
taught them that there was something better
devotion than beautiful marble & lofty domes. He
was aware of that disposition, teach mankind at all
times, especially before the diffusion of thy, have been
so prone. - the disposition, I mean, to consider the Deity
as local & circumstanced, dwelling in this particular
temple or in that particular spot, & shedding the bles-
sings of His presence in certain chosen scenes, situations.

The idea of one infinite mind, spread through the uni-
verse, was too vast for the imperfect thoughts of men;
they accordingly broke down the idea of divinity into nu-
merous parts & assigned to each a peculiar habitation
& peculiar honours. This way of thinking was one on
which the feebleness of man's mind could repose better
than on the idea of one omnipresent Being. It is try-
archus taught us, who might have taught the An-
thenians, that the universe, or the universe alone, is the
habitation of God, that he is everywhere equally at
all times, that neither this mountain, nor that other
may claim the honor of his peculiar residence, that
he will not dwell in the grandest temple man can rear,
but he will dwell by his spirit in the heart of the humblest
who cherish pure thoughts & seek for his favor.
There are also in this speech other allusions to the reigning errors of the place and times. They thought, for instance, that the services which they rendered to their gods, were necessary to their happiness, that the victims which they offered were a sort of food for their deities, to withhold which would draw upon them the vengeance of these superior beings. In fact, they practically considered their gods as in some measure dependent on their worshipers for their felicity or greatness. St. Paul met this gross error by assuring them that the true God is not worshipped by men's hands, as though he needed anything. He is not in man to augment or to diminish his glory or happiness. All the services or worship which we are called upon to render is for our own good, not for the good of the Deity. The heathen was to have considered himself, with regard to his gods, like courtiers around a monarch, who must flatter, please him if they would escape his vengeance; but as he has relieved man from this slavish condition, taught him that he is to worship his God, not because that God needs any thing from his hands, but to purify and elevate his own heart, that he must offer that
rite of his prayer & praises to his God, not because that great & good Being needs his praises, but because the effect of such services on his own soul may be most happy & voluntary. As all his man to his Maker by indelible, most beneficent ties, as those of children to a father, not by the servile arbitrary bents of a capricious tyranny.

Again: St. Paul in his memorable address inculcates principles, which were evidently levelled at one of the false philosophical principles, of which I have already spoken. Thus the Epicureans attributed the origin of all things to chance; with them there was no designing cause, no great moves in the vast machinery of the universe. And their gods had no care or providence, nor man or the events of the world; with them an intermitted ease & indolent repose were the chief felicities. Of course, they imagined, their gods, in order to be happy must have nothing to do, must be free from all concern or inspection in the management of the affairs of the world. But from St. Paul they heard quite a different lesson: with him, it is "God who made the world & all things therein," in whom "we have done, & have our being" - a who hath determined the times before
appointed the bounds of the habitations of men: the Apostles, there is no chance of confusion in the wide range of creation. The mighty, magnificent system of things around us is from one omnipotent, ever operating Being: that Being, who lives through all life, extends through all extent, spreads undivided, creates unspent. Nor does the stainless God dwell in incidental refuge, far from the works of his hands, unconcerned in the government of the world he has created. He has not given us up to be tossed about, the effects of circumstances, alternately rising as falling, unchristian reasonable, as the hands of chance may distribute good and evil. No, it is He, who lives around us in us, who gives the world with the steady uniform operation of general laws, under whose administration the course of events is going on, like the steady, powerful motion of a stream, tending to great and beneficent results. Imagine yourself for a moment, giving up these great, determining truths, then asking yourself to the cold, heartless philosophy of the Epicureans. Would it not be like throwing a funeral pall over creation, letting a blank upon nature, blotting out the hope of man? You would no longer feel that in God's
live and move, have your being; you would no longer be
covered by the conviction that man is the peculiar
charge of God, but you would stand alone in the uni-
verse, without a friend or protector; the next wave of
time might wash you into annihilation. St. Paul
tells them, they might have learned a better lesson from
one of their own poets; she says: “for we are also his
offspring,” who does not feel the force and comfort of the
truth contained in this short sentence. Is he not
distinct with the Ah! the striking conclusion, it he does not
from that truth?

I cannot omit a few remarks on another declaration of
the, that God has made of one blood all nations of men
dwell in the face of all the earth.” It is supposed that
in this sentence there is an allusion to a peculiar fancy
of the Athenians. This vain people pretended to ascribe
their origin to no migration or descent from other nations
tribes, but to think that they sprang up from the
soil on which they lived, were coeval with nature itself.
Hence they called themselves (γῆ νεως, òi τοις άνθρωπος) “the earth
born.” The indigenous production of their own land? Per-
haps too, they might have had a disposition not recomm-
encing the notions of antiquity, to trace their own history,
still they reached the most ancient of their forefathers,
of whom they had any account, to stop there, I call him the first man, from whom all men spring. Such wild
concepts are rebuked by the Spirit, asserting that all men had a common origin, are made of one blood, by Him, who regards us all as children in His great family, alike the objects of His bounty of care.

And men, after these most happy, striking remarks in reference to the errors of Heathenism, St. Pauls before closing gives the Athenians a glimpse of one or two of the great, essential truths of life. He tells them that God for wise good purposes had permitted so long a time of religious ignorance and darkness, but new and better order of things was rising before them. He had sent forth His servants to be the heralds of glad tidings, to call upon men everywhere to repent, to announce to them, that the day was coming, in which the world would be judged in righteousness by the instrumentality of Him who had been raised from the dead and ordained for that high and holy purpose. How bright, how relieving do these few truths appear in contrast with the errors of foolish men, we have been contemplating. The spirit that had reared itself in vain front infection among those, refutes itself upon these pages.
no better support... Who does not perceive, the moment he enters upon this statement of ... difference between them, the fantastic and opinions of the philosophers? There is altogether another atmosphere about the same principles... something that fills... HC. Paul selects to profess to his Athenian audience. They are, you will observe... most plain and fundamental truths of our holy religion. There is here none of that preaching such were in the present day, condescendingly true preaching. Not a word is said about the dark and doubtful doctrines, about the nature of man, the metaphysical nature of the rank of the Savior, irresistible grace, unconditional election... These things are in the taste of modern days, not of the Apostolic times... It would be well, if these who now preach Christ in crepensive... it has never been heard before, would imitate the example of Paul in this respect... So abstaining from these representations, which besides being unscriptural, cite a host of prejudices...
at the outset, would insist upon these few plain truths while at the bottom of religion, were adapted to make their way to the understandings of hearts of men... In this part of St. Paul's speech, there is likewise probably some allusion to the opinions of the Stoics. It was favorite notion of these men, that the true disciples of their sect had reached the perfection of virtue, needed no improvement. But the Apostle tells them that they, as well as other men, are called upon to repent, that they had not reached that state where no change for the better could be wrought upon them, or that they had need of a more thorough pains-taking virtue, than that in the perfection of which they so much boasted... Another of their erroneous notions was a belief in such a fatal necessity, extending to gods & men, as would destroy all moral accountability. But in opposition to this opinion of so base moral tendency, Paul solemnly declares that men will be judged in righteousness; & this great truth of course presupposes, that men are free agents, accountable for their actions, & fit subjects of reward or punishment, according as they have used well or ill the powers given...
A God has conformed in them, and without this they could not expectably be judged... Thus we see that, besides the general principles of universal truths contained in the Apostles's speech, there are antidotes thrown out by the way, to the religious errors of fools of the time... And, indeed, there is here an admirable summary of the essentials of the true religion,—the duty of repentance, of the certainty of being called to account hereafter for the deeds done in the body. The best worst man, that ever lived, has certainly imperfections enough to mown over; on reviewing his life must often pause with the publican's prayer,—'God be merciful to me a sinner';—& they, who have been most faithful to deliberate, in the use of means of privileges, may surely look to the judgment of another world with fear of trembling. How much more then, should these sentiments of centriation of awe affect the great men of mankind, who have been careless, impenitent, unfaithful, & forgetful of God. On reviewing this admirable speech as a whole, there is struck with the perfect adaptation of this address to the situation & wants of these to whom it was made. It bears upon it the stamp of having been spoken here...
it subjects to have been at the apostles, to the Athenians. And in fact, it may be remarked in general, that the preaching and instructions of the apostles were suited to the actual circumstances of these to whom they were directed. They were fitted for the occasion on which they were delivered, it would seem out of place on any other occasion, at least, would lose much of their beauty and force. The different manners, in which the Apostles preached to Jews and Gentiles is a case in point. In treating with the Jews, they took for granted the existence of providence of the true God, because in this the Jews already firmly believed, as was with the Gentiles, who were given over to idolatry, yet they went back to first principles, as St. Paul in the speech at Athens, began with insisting on the being of a government of the one, ever living God, by an easy transition from this subject, they then urged the claims of the religion of Jesus. In reasoning with the Jews, St. Paul quotes the Scriptures of the O.T., because these were the oracles of their faith; in reasoning with the Athenians, in the other hand, who knew not or regarded not these scriptures, he quotes from the own facts for confirmation and illustration. Now men—
in these features of congruity, because they are among the strongest internal evidences for the truth and credibility of the N.T. Not only do whole books bear about them the character of the peculiar circumstances of the times, but particular narrations & speeches have often them a still impress of the occasion, seem as if they could not have been written or spoken in any other occasion. Nor is there the least appearance of art or design in this adaptation. Now ask any fairminded man, whether this be a strong presumptive evidence for the truth of what is related in the N.T. - forged could not have produced such striking congruity, it must have come fresh from the truth of the case... Had these books been the fruit of an inventive mind, they would have been more general; for the forgers of accounts knew that particular it is very likely to plunge them in contradictions if they carelessly churn it... But in the N.T., there is such maintenance of circumstances, yet every where things appear natural & appropriate, just as they should done the occasion... In this fact, myri, there is wrapped up an almost infallible mark of truth...

We have thus brought to a close our remarks on the account of St. Paul's visit to Athens. It is expected it will not be without profit, that this subject has been reviewed.
before us. We are told of the careless Athenians, that after the Apostle had finished his address, "some mocked; others said, we will hear thee again of this matter." My friends, let us not imitate their example. When "the resurrection of the dead," the great truths connected with it, are urged upon us, let us not turn them to decision, or put off the thought of them to a more convenient time. What St. Paul preached at Athens is now preached to us; believe me, my friend, "it is not again a new thing, for it is your life."  

April 1828.

At home. April 20th, 1828. afternoon.

At Hingham (Mr. Brooks') Feb. 14th, 1824. afternoon.