

WITNESS IN THE AREOPAGUS

Acts 17:16–34

OPENING QUESTION

Can you think of a book, movie, or piece of art that made you think differently about life or faith? What was it, and what impact did it have on you?

CONTEXT

In Acts, Paul's visit to Athens is a pivotal moment in his mission to the Gentiles. Athens, known for its rich intellectual and cultural heritage, was full of philosophical debates and religious diversity, making it a challenging yet strategic place for Paul to preach. Speaking at the Areopagus, a hub for public discourse, Paul uses cultural references, such as the altar to an unknown god, to connect with the Athenians' spiritual curiosity. This story invites us to consider how we can thoughtfully engage with diverse worldviews today on and off campus, using cultural touchpoints to share the Gospel effectively.

READ ACTS 17:16–34

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.²⁴ "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 human hands.²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'²⁹ "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 human design and skill.³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."³² 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."³³ At that, Paul left the Council.³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

DISCUSS

1. What was Paul's reaction to seeing the idols in Athens, and how did this motivate his actions?
2. In the agora (the marketplace), Paul encounters two leading philosophical schools of his day: the epicureans and the stoics. Epicureans believed that the gods and the material world did not intersect, so one should seek maximum pleasure from a quiet life. The stoics, on the other hand, believed that divinity resided among and within people. The good life, then, centered on getting in touch with the inner divine (i.e., rationality). Reflect on the different worldviews and philosophies that you encounter in your daily life, whether on campus, at work, or in social settings.
3. What is the significance of Paul referencing the altar to an unknown god in his speech at the Areopagus?
4. How did the Athenians respond to Paul's message, and what does this teach us about evangelism?

REFLECT

As we reflect on Paul's speech at the Areopagus in Acts 17, we see a powerful example of how the Gospel can be communicated effectively within diverse cultural and intellectual contexts. This story challenges us to consider how we can thoughtfully and respectfully share the message of Jesus in our own contexts and how we can find common ground amidst the spiritual longings of those around us. Just as Paul connected with the Athenians, we are called to engage with and witness to those in our diverse communities.

1. Reflect on a time when you engaged someone in a conversation about faith. What approach did you use, and how was it received?
2. Think of those you interact with regularly on campus who identify with a different worldview than your own. How can you find common ground with them their beliefs or worldviews when talking about Jesus?
3. Paul was distressed by the idolatry in Athens. What "idols" do you see on campus that might hinder people from seeking God today?
4. Like the Areopagus, the university can be a challenging space to share the Gospel. How can you support one another in your witness on campus?

PRAY

Lord, guide us as we engage with the culture on campus. Give us the ability to wisely discern our context and speak truth with grace and wisdom. May our lives reflect Jesus's love for all people and may you give us courage to be bold in our witness. Amen.