Acts: “We Can’t All Be Right”
Acts 17:22-34

We are in Acts 17, and this morning we will examine Paul’s famous speech to the Greek intelligentsia in Athens. Please stand and let us read Acts 17:22-34.

Now, before we get started, let’s set the context. Remember that Paul recently came into Athens and discovered that the city was full of idols. Historians report that there were over 30,000 idols of different gods and goddesses in first century Athens. We learned in 17:16 that Paul was provoked in his spirit when he saw the idols, so he immediately went to work by engaging three groups of people with the Gospel: those in the synagogue, those in the marketplace, and those who were philosophers.

Specifically, Paul has already engaged Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, and last week we learned in vs. 19 that these philosophers “took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.’”

The word “areopagus” literally means the “the hill of Ares.” Ares was a Greek God, and his Roman counterpart was called Mars; thus the origin of the famous term, “Mars Hill.” The hill of Ares, or Mars Hill, was a low hill that was located below but within shouting distance of the great Acropolis, and it was there that the highest court of the land met for hundreds of years leading up to the first century. Although the Council of the Areopagus was known for many years to be the court where murder trials were heard, by the first century it is likely that the court had wider responsibilities. The Areopagus would have consisted of 30 members, all who would have previously served in lower courts. The members of the esteemed council were called Areopagites, and once elected, they served for life. So yes…this would have effectively been the Supreme Court of the Athenian democracy.

Some scholars assume that because Paul is accused in vs. 18 of “preaching foreign divinities” and that he is “taken and brought before” the Areopagus, that he has actually been arrested and put on trial before the court. That is a possibility, but it seems unlikely for a few reasons. First, Luke always refers to those situations utilizing predictable terms such as “city magistrates” “jailors” “arrested” “put them in custody” and so on as we’ve seen in other places throughout the book of Acts. Secondly, if this was a trial, there is no pronouncement of a verdict. Paul is neither convicted nor acquitted. He is not “let go” or “released from custody” as we might expect. In
fact, the “hearing” seems to end awkwardly with some of the council “mocking” Paul and others expressing some nominal interest in hearing him again at another time.

Now, there was an ancient practice in the Areopagus stemming back from the fourth century that would allow the “defendant” to permanently leave the city after a first hearing without fear of further prosecution, so if this was in fact a trial, that might account for why Paul leaves town shortly after his address to the council. However, I don’t think we have enough evidence to make the assumption that this is a legal trial. I do think the Areopagus were looked upon as city leaders, as the wisest people in the city in regards to discernment, and it is for that reason the philosophers are eager to get the Council’s take on the Apostle Paul’s message.

Now, as we’ve already been told by Luke, two prevailing schools of thought among the Athenians in the first century included Epicurean philosophy and Stoic philosophy. There were other philosophies and forms of religion such as emperor worship and those who worshipped the Greek gods and goddesses, but I suspect most of the Areopagus were either Stoics or Epicureans. Since Paul is very familiar with both schools, and since Luke mentioned that both schools were present and engaged with Paul, we’ll need to know a bit about both groups before we look at Paul’s speech.

**The Epicureans**
The Epicureans were followers of a man named Epicurus (341-270 BC) ![Epicurus bust](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Epicurus_bust2.jpg). Epicurus gathered people together in his famous Garden, and he had a fairly large following prior to his death. The Epicurean system was based in the main on the Atomic theory of Democritus. According to this theory, the universe consists of atoms, which are eternal, without origin and without end, constantly forming new combinations, which gradually break up and give rise to new ones. The combination is due to chance acting on the atoms which are eternally falling through infinite space. (Lake and Cadbury, English Translation and Commentary, 210-211).

As such, the Epicureans did not believe in a “creator” per se, nor did they believe in the afterlife; nor any spiritual realities apart from the physical world. Even humans souls and the gods were comprised of atoms. The Epicureans believed that life was about pleasure and the fulfillment of the individual. Things like friendship and living in community contributed to the best life for individuals, as did coming to peace about death, since death could not be experienced. They believed death just led to our atoms being absorbed back into the eternal universe of matter. Though Epicureanism did eventually lead to blatant hedonism, that’s not how it started. For Epicurus, true pleasure was freedom from fear associated with mortality and the superstitions of gods or goddesses, along with freedom from physical pain or suffering. There’s much more we could learn about Epicureanism, but that will suffice for now.
The Stoics
The Stoics were followers of Zeno (b. 336) who gathered his disciples on the Stoa Poikile in the Athenian marketplace. Zeno was very popular, and his disciples so frequented the Stoa that they eventually became known as the “Stoics.” Zeno’s philosophy was essentially pantheistic. Divinity was responsible for the universe, but the Divine was in the universe and of the universe. Zeno taught that all things were governed by the “Logos,” which for them meant the universal “world-soul”. The Stoics viewed the “logos” as the means by which the world could be understood, and as such they equated the “logos” with the “reason” with which all things were governed in conformity to a predetermined law. Eventually “logos” and “reason” were synonymous, though not in the detached, mechanical way we think of reason today.

The biblical scholar Alida Sewell writes: Stoicism lacked the concept of a personal God. It was materialistic and deterministic. But it was not a “meaningless determinism, but rather [they saw the order of the world] as the result of a most perfect legislation in which everything has been perfectly arranged. It was therefore possible to identify the world reason with Zeus, who predetermines and rules everything through his law.” Stoics were fatalists: everything that happens must be accepted. However, this “cosmological determinism” was modified by their insistence on interior freedom, in the sense that a man can alter his judgment on events and his attitude towards events, seeing them and welcoming them as the expression of ‘God’s Will.’ (Paul at Athens: An Examination of His Areopagus Address in the Light of its Historical and Philosophical Background by Alida Leni Sewell; p 11).

I know that’s heady stuff, but here’s what I want you to see. I want you to see that the council members considering Paul’s argument in first century Athens are freakishly similar to our contemporary audience in 21st century America! In the big world of ideas, you basically have three options to account for how things are: 1) the universe is purely material, random, and void of meaning (Epicureans, the New Atheists; the “I believe in science” crowd; 2) god is in everything and everything is god, which leads to fatalism (the Stoics, the Hindus, the New Agers; or 3) God created the heavens and the earth, and God exists independent of His creation (Judaism; Islam; Christianity). So…as we study Paul’s speech, listen for how he speaks to the materialists and the pantheists, connecting with them as he is able and yet correcting their ignorance through a presentation of a biblical worldview.

Paul’s Speech
In vs. 22-23 Paul begins his speech with these words, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your
worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

First notice that Paul is incredibly polite and honoring of his esteemed audience. He does not attack their idolatry directly, and he honors that they are a deeply religious people. He then points out what he found among the thousands of idols, and that is a particular altar with the inscription “To the unknown god.”

There is a story about this altar based on a tradition recorded as history by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek author of the third century A.D. in a classical work called *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. In the sixth century before Christ, Athens was struck by the plague. Many offerings to the multitude of Athenian gods had been made, but still the plague continued. Finally, the oracle instructed the Athenians to call on Epimenides, a Cretan hero, to come over and help them. He advised them to have hungry sheep ready by dawn, and to bring them to the Hill of Ares. Shepherds were instructed to watch them and see if any lay down, which would be very unusual, as the hungry sheep would naturally want to graze first rather than lie down. Then Epimenides instructed the shepherds to mark the spot where the sheep laid down. The sheep that laid down were sacrificed there on special altars which were inscribed “To an Unknown God.” After that the plague was lifted, and the Athenians showed their gratitude to Epimenides. (Sewell, p. 12)

Paul was clearly familiar with this story of Epimenides as we’ll see in a moment, and so he gets the significance of the altar to the unknown god. He wisely leverages this piece of Athenian history to make his appeal that there is a GOD who has power, who is there, who could even lift a plague from their city…but it’s none of the gods fashioned by human hands…it’s the GOD who created the heavens and the earth. Listen to what he says next beginning with vs. 24:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Paul begins his work by pointing to God as the Creator, as the Lord of heaven and earth, who is independent of His creation. God creates, but God exists separately from the creation. God does not need His creation nor is God dependent on the creation for anything. The obvious point is that God cannot possibly be bound up in an idol, an altar, or a temple made of human hands when in fact God made the human hands. Paul tops off his argument with a line that likely came from Epimenides himself…a famous poem that included these lines:
They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one - The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies! But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest forever; For in thee we live and move and have our being.

By the way, Paul quotes the first part of that poem in Titus 1:12-13 and even refers to the poet as a Cretan…so clearly Paul was well schooled on Epimenides. At this point we should assume that Paul just made some huge points with the Areopagus!

Having established his argument for the Creator God who is independent of the creation and not at all associated with the Athenian idols, Paul goes on in vs. 26:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place…

Paul is now establishing the sovereignty of God and the answer to the question, “How did we get here? And “How do we account for the way things are?” We got here because God created man and from that first man came everybody else. God made people to live on the earth, but God directed that history…He is sovereign over all nations. Do you see how Paul is leveling the playing field? The Athenians thought they were superior to other races, but Paul in as much just said, “There are no humans who are superior to other humans…we all come from the same One man, and we are all created by the One True God who is Lord of heaven and earth. The only reason some people live here and some people live over there is because God has deemed it so.”

And now, Paul will address the question, “But to what end?” Look at vs. 27:

…and that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

What is the goal of human existence? To seek God, to find our way back to our Source. Now notice…Paul is not quoting scripture, and he’s leaving a bunch of stuff out, right? Paul is forming his argument around our common human experience, which is this: we are all generally unhappy, no matter how hard we try to be happy! The Epicureans try to find happiness through the pursuit of pleasure, but pleasure is fleeting. The Stoics try to find happiness through detachment, but to be detached from passion, love, and relationships is to dehumanize our existence…there may be less suffering through detachment, but there is little to live FOR and nothing to die for. Then there are those who are drowning in idolatrous polytheism, making sacrifices to the gods made of their own hands. They are self-deceived and always fearful because the idols cannot not help them. So what’s the goal…what’s the path to human fulfillment? Seek God…find your way back to the One who made you.

The obvious next question is “Well where is God? How do we find Him?” Listen to how Paul addresses that question beginning with vs. 27
Yet he (God) is actually not far from each one of us, for “In him we live and move and have our being;” as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed his offspring.”

Paul is now introducing new information that will not readily fit into the Epicurean or the Stoic philosophies. According to Paul, the God who created the universe, the Lord of heaven and earth, is not some distant, disinterested god as is often pictured by the Deists. No, this Creator God is both our Creator and our Sustainer…He empowers us to live, and move and to exist every day. This Creating and Sustaining God is also like a Father to us, and we as humans are like his own children.

Once again, Paul works in the last line of the poem we saw earlier from Epimenides, and then uses another famous poem from the poet Aratus. His poem included these lines:

Never, O men, let us leave him unmentioned, all ways are full of Zeus and all meeting-places of men; the sea and the harbours are full of him. In every direction we all have to do with Zeus; for we are also his offspring.

Once again, Paul is trying to weave his argument around source material that was already well known in the Greek culture. The Stoics understood Zeus as the “logos” that was in all things and responsible for the laws of the universe, but here Paul is taking that to a new level: God (the true Zeus), is Creator, Sustainer, and Father…he is near to us like a Father to His children, and though He has placed us on earth to seek Him, He is also seeking us. He is closer than you think.

Paul will now circle back to complete his argument against the use of idols in vs. 29:

Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Paul is appealing to what we know is revealed in scripture: God formed man in His own image; He did not give us permission or the ability to form God in our own image. In fact, God commanded us to NEVER, EVER, EVER worship engraved images. Can you feel that tension? I guarantee the Athenians felt that tension…big time! If God is God, and we have been created, we are subject to the Almighty…He is not subject to us. Children cannot manufacture their own Father! Do you see how much bigger God just became for those who were accustomed to thinking of god as a graven image, or an impersonal concept, or as a non-existent entity in a purely material world? Paul’s argument from logic and Greek sources leaves his audience under the judgment of a Personal Father God who cannot possibly be pleased that His offspring are worshipping objects or concepts created from their arts or imaginations.
Now that Paul has established his case for a biblical worldview, he will speak with boldness and authority to the Areopagus beginning with vs.30:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man who he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

If Paul had managed to get this far without offending his listeners, we can be very certain that they were all pretty offended when he said these last few lines! First, Paul unapologetically tells the most learned, sophisticated, most respected and honored men in Athens that they have been in a season of ignorance. The word he uses here is the same root for the word “agnosticism”…which literally means “lacking knowledge.” Paul says, “God has overlooked this epoch in history when you and the world lacked knowledge, but that time has now come to end.”

Notice that Paul’s worldview is linear: In the beginning God created (CREATION); then there was a time of ignorance (the FALL); now is the time of repentance (PLAN OF REDEMPTION), because the end is coming and that will be a time of judgment (END OF THE AGE). Keep in mind that the prevailing worldviews in Athens were cyclical or static…they did not see human history as linear with a beginning and an end. The understanding of time as linear is truly unique to those religions birthed out of the Hebrew Scriptures.

So what time is it? It is now time to repent! Repent of what? Repent of worshipping idols and concepts, repent of going about your life as though the Father is not there and living as though this precious life is all about your pleasure. Repent of your SIN against the holy and righteous God who is there and is responsible for the moral code that is intuitive and written upon the hearts of all human beings in every tribe and tongue all over the world.

Repent…turn around! Why? Because judgment is coming. The Judge is coming. Paul is appealing to the Athenian’s sense of justice, which frankly is left more or less unaddressed by the Epicureans and the Stoics. Both philosophies are resigned to accept life as it is; neither provide a very good answer to the justice question; neither speak to the moral dilemma of all humans who generally know that we are morally accountable. The Epicureans tried to brush it off by convincing themselves that there is no god and no eternal accountability (sound familiar?); the Stoics resigned themselves to be concerned about only those things they could influence, so justice was not a primary concern if it led them to worry or suffer about those things they could not change. This is a view now highly promoted by popular icons such as Paul challenges both camps by making clear that JUSTICE matters, God is there, and judgment is coming for all of us.

Keep in mind how ironic it is that Paul is telling the judges of Athens that THE JUDGE is coming to judge them! Even more scandalous is this notion that the judge is a PERSON, one
appointed by God! And the way we can be assured that the Judge has been appointed by God is because God raised Him from the dead!

Admittedly, that’s a lot of new information to take in at one time, and for the Areopagus, you almost get the sense that the leader of the council jumped in at that point and said, “Alright! Thank you Paul from Tarsus. That was initially interesting and then you just got weird at the end there. Appreciate your effort, but I think we’re done here. We’re not into Zombie Judges and all that. Maybe you could come speak to us another time…or not. Enjoy the rest of your time in Athens, and don’t let the door hit you on the way out of town.”

Clearly Paul did not experience a ton of success following this speech, but we get the sense that he got cut off and dismissed before he could get to the good news part…the part where he would tell the council how the Judge had already satisfied the penalty for their sin…how the Judge was also the Father who made Himself known to us as One of us…the Son…the Lamb of God who takes away the great PLAGUE of sin that sits upon all of us as a curse. Paul didn’t get to tell them that through repentance and faith in the Perfect One who died in our place, that we could experience the deepest longing of our hearts: forgiveness and reconciliation with our Father. We know that’s where Paul was going…it would not appear that he ever got there with the Areopagites.

Paul likely learned a ton that day, but I suspect he was also frustrated by the outcome. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit did move. Luke reports that there were some notable people who joined Paul and eventually came to believe in the Gospel. One of those men was Dionysius, who was, in fact, one of the Areopagites. That’s pretty huge. Another person was the woman known as Damaris…likely a very prestigious woman since her name is provided here by Luke. And there were others. I find comfort in knowing that God can break through among skeptical intellectuals…we just need to get the conversation started and do the best that we can.

We are out of time, so please let me sum up three quick take-aways, and then we’ll go:

1) We can’t all be right. We could all be wrong, but we can’t all be right. Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Christianity are not compatible worldviews. In the end, we are all religious, but not all religions say the same thing…not at all. So how do you make sense of our existence, the way things are, your moral conscience, and the meaning of life? How you attempt to answer those questions matters, so dig deep and go find out. As far as I am concerned, the only reasonable answer is a plain reading of the Old and New Testament. I would be happy to discuss that with any of you over a cup of coffee…a lot of us here would welcome that opportunity.

2) True fulfillment in this world is dependent upon us getting connected with our Source that resides in another world. We were made to seek God and make our way back to Him. The good
news of the Gospel is that He has come looking for us in His Son, Jesus Christ. The truth and fulfillment we all are looking for is not a concept or a philosophy or anything that can be found on this planet. The longing of every human heart is to come home, and home is a Person…home is Jesus, and He is closer than you think.

3) There are clues of God’s existence in every facet of creation, even in the writ and symbols of many religions around the world. When we find those clues, they are excellent starting places for a conversation about the One True God. As such, it pays to read deeply and widely, to understand the other religions and philosophies of the world so that we might be prepared to give a reason for our hope in a way that our friends from different cultures can hear it. But there is, in the end, no substitute for the revelation of God in his WORD; the true and ultimate LOGOS; the WORD made flesh. WE must finally lead people to Jesus for them to be saved; but be encouraged; Jesus is already pursuing them…just as He is pursuing us. Let’s close in prayer.