



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Paul and the Philosophers  
*(The Book of Acts, pp. 27-34)*

### Suggested Article:

📖 Spreading the Gospel  
"To the Ends of the Earth"  
*(The Book of Acts, pp. 46-54)*

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Paul and the Philosophers

Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council is a paradigm for "cross-worldview" evangelism. He restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.

### Prayer

We want to make every thought captive to you, Lord,  
**but too often we bow before idols of our own making.**  
We want to proclaim with our lips, "Christ is Risen!"  
**but too often we wait to utter those words in the safe haven of your Church, and hesitate to bear witness to you in the world.**  
We want to be known as Christians by our love,  
**but too often we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.**  
Lord, by your grace, may we not be ruled by our fears or our passions; may our minds be fixed on the things above.  
**Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: Acts 17:16-34

### Reflection

The Apostle Paul had never seen anything like Athens: "the city was full of idols." When some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took him before the city's governing council to hash out his complaints about this, the assembly (like the promontory on which it gathered) was named "Areopagus" – the hill of the god of war, Ares (or Mars). You get the picture: there were ancient idols or references to them in every direction.

Instead of ranting on about the idols or mocking his audience for honoring them, Paul adopted a winsome tone in his speech. Tim Brookins finds much to admire in the Apostle's approach.

- ▶ *Paul compliments his listeners and seeks common ground with them.* There is no sarcasm in his introduction: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are." Paul seizes upon their altar inscribed "To an unknown God," and identifies this figure with the God whom he preaches. Brookins notes, "For the moment Paul highlights what they have in common and pushes their differences into the background." Indeed, the many claims about God that follow (17:24-30) chart even more common ground. "Only at this point does Paul say something that an average Greek listener might have found unusual: this God has appointed a day of judgment, to be executed by the (unnamed) man whom he has designated, and whom he has raised from the dead as proof (17:31)."
- ▶ *Rather than quote Scripture, Paul carefully cites commonplace themes.* When Jewish figures are alluded to, Paul does not name them explicitly (cf. 17:26, 31). While his philosophical quotations (17:28) would please the Stoics much more than the Epicureans – rarely does an argument appeal to everyone – they are more intelligible to the pagan audience than Scripture passages would be. Even here (as we'll see), Paul reinterprets these quotations in light of the biblical narrative.



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- ▶ *Paul draws his listeners into the biblical framework.* “Deep-structure differences from Stoicism are evident at every turn,” Brookins says. So, for Paul the unity of the human race (17:26, 29) comes from our common descent from one *man*, Adam, who reflects (rather than replicates) the Creator’s glory. This departs radically from the Stoic view that humans descend from *stars*, which are divine bodies that together comprise God (or Zeus). God’s nearness to us (17:27, 28) is not due to us being divine fragments, but because God sustains our lives and cares for us. For Stoics, the “times of human ignorance” (17:30) would refer only to the temporary state of childhood; Paul also, and especially, has in mind the Jewish idea of God’s self-revelation unfolding in history.

Paul veers further from the Stoics. They said the universe has no beginning and endlessly repeats its natural cycles. Paul deploys a Jewish linear view of time: it has a beginning and is moving toward a goal of divine judgment. “Popular Greek thinking left room, at most, for a final judgment according to works,” Brookins notes. “But Paul has much more than this in view: there will be an *appointed* day of judgment for all of creation at once, and a divinely-appointed *agent* of judgment who was *resurrected* from the dead. The Greeks believed in none of these things, least of all resurrection.”

- ▶ *Paul clarifies essential points of difference.* Why does the Apostle make such controversial claims about the coming time of judgment and Christ’s resurrection at the end of his speech? Brookins thinks that while “Paul was happy to use the words and ideas of the surrounding culture as a point of departure, he was also unwilling to keep essential points of contrast concealed, despite knowing full well the potential consequences of revealing them. The audience response to his approach was mixed at best—‘some scoffed; but others said “We will hear you again about this”’ while ‘some joined him and became believers’ (17:32, 34). To the extent that this response constitutes a ‘failure,’ it presents us with a kind of failure that we could afford to emulate more often.”

### Study Questions

1. How would you characterize Paul’s approach to communicating the gospel in the pagan culture of Athens? What are the advantages of his approach? What are some dangers of miscommunication, and how does Paul deal with them?
2. Have you talked about your faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity? If so, compare your experience with Paul’s. What can you learn from his approach in the Areopagus speech?
3. How does Raphael depict Paul’s confrontation with idolatry in *Paul Preaching in Athens*? How did this tapestry’s original placement in the Sistine Chapel reinforce its message?
4. How does Terry York describe sharing the gospel with a new culture in his hymn “As Christ and Church and Congregation”? What themes from Paul’s speech to the Areopagus Council are reflected in this hymn text?

Departing Hymn: “As Christ and Church and Congregation”

# Paul and the Philosophers

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how Paul communicated the gospel in the pagan culture of Athens.
2. To review your personal experience of talking about faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with an Observation

"In many ways, the religious context North American Christians inhabit today shares less in common with the Bible Belt culture of the mid twentieth century than it does the pluralistic pagan environment in which the apostle Paul struck out to establish the world's first congregations," Tim Brookins writes. "Until recently, North American pastors could expect their pews to be lined with men and women intimately acquainted with the Bible's stories and ideas. Evangelists stood before audiences of men and women who believed in both the existence of God and the Bible's authority as a sacred text. But in the 'post-Christian' age of the present, Christians now stand, like Paul, on their own 'Areopagus' and address audiences of 'Athenians.'" (*The Book of Acts*, p. 27)

In his study of Paul's speech to the philosophers, city councilors, and others at the Areopagus, Brookins uncovers insights for our conversations about faith and discipleship and our communication of the gospel today.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read responsively the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 17:16-34 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Timothy Brookins admires the rhetorical artistry of the apostolic sermons as they are presented in Acts, especially Paul's address to the Areopagus Council in Athens. In this study, Brookins identifies four features of Paul's approach to communicating the gospel to a sophisticated pagan audience: seeking common ground, working from commonplace themes, drawing the audience into the biblical framework, and clarifying essential differences between the cultural and Christian viewpoints. As members study Paul's speech (and its artistic echoes in painting and hymnody).

## Study Questions

1. Form four small groups to investigate the features of Paul's approach that Timothy Brookins identifies: (1) seeking common ground with the pagan audience, (2) working from commonplace themes rather than Biblical quotations, (3) gradually drawing the audience into the biblical framework by interpreting those common themes from the perspective of the biblical narrative, and (4) clarifying the essential differences between the audience's cultural viewpoints and the Christian perspective.

Each feature has advantages and dangers. After you discuss these features individually, consider how they work together in a speech or conversation. Are the dangers of one feature ameliorated by the use of the others? What dangers of miscommunication remain?

2. Encourage some members to share their personal experiences in talking about their faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity. With these contemporary examples before the group, members can compare their experiences with Paul's, draw guidance from Paul's approach, and share new insights that might deal with the dangers identified in the question above.

If members' experiences were not positive, what can they learn from Paul about faithfulness that does not expect uniform success? If members have not had personal experience, how can they be more open to opportunities to interact with and share their faith and discipleship with persons who know little about the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity?

3. Raphael's cartoon *Paul Preaching in Athens* depicts Paul addressing a small crowd, but looking over their heads toward a statue of the war-god Mars in the background. It is from that idol that the location and council drew their name, "Areopagus," or Hill of Ares (or Mars). Figures in the crowd represent the three responses identified by Luke: "some scoffed; but others said 'We will hear you again about this,'" while "some joined him and became believers" (Acts 17:32, 34).

"Very few visitors today realize that the Sistine Chapel decoration is incomplete without the tapestries" made from Raphael's cartoons, Heidi Hornik explains. The tapestry from this cartoon "was, from an iconographic perspective, appropriately placed below Cosimo Rosselli's fresco from the Moses cycle depicting the *Adoration of the Golden Calf*" to highlight Paul's deep concern about the presence of many idols in the city of Athens.

4. How does Terry York describe sharing the gospel with a new culture in his hymn "As Christ and Church and Congregation"? What themes from Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council are reflected in this hymn text?

In "As Christ and Church and Congregation," Terry York employs three images to describe sharing the gospel with a new culture: it is like Christ walking free in the new space, guiding us as "His footprints' fresh and firm impressions / map the worlds we would not see"; like Christ's body, the Church, taking root and spouting "green" in new soil; and like the Church dancing/embracing and dodging/separating from elements of the new culture's worldview as they are expressed in "language, song, and symbol." The final stanza draws the conclusion that the Church should follow Christ's example: "live his teachings, live his grace, / like Christ arise, each day, extending / unconditional embrace."

Consider how each of these images – following Christ's footsteps to see worlds we would otherwise ignore, sprouting a familiar plant in new soil, and dancing/dodging with a new partner – reflect features of Paul's approach to communicating the gospel to a sophisticated pagan audience.

## Departing Hymn

"As Christ and Church and Congregation" is on pp. 35-37 of *The Book of Acts*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.