

**PREACHING JESUS**  
**Acts 17:16-34**

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Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lackman, in their book, *One Nation Under God*, find that religious identity today is little more than a spiritual gloss on a largely secular society. While 90 percent of us say we've got religion, living it is another story. We personalize religion, with little regard for higher authority, such as scripture or the church. We like our religion without the particulars – no requirements for moral action, no restraints on personal pleasure, few communal obligations.

For those who dare to take their faith seriously, be on guard. Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter, author of *The Culture of Disbelief*, says people who profess that their lives are ordered and inspired by faith are mocked at every turn. The assumption: if you want to talk about your spiritual convictions in public, you are irrational, you are a right-wing zealot, and you are wrong.

If the Apostle Paul were to preach in America today, he would, perhaps, have haunting reflections back to Athens and his dialogue with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and his appearance before the Areopagus. Perhaps Athens was not on Paul's original missionary program, but, for his own safety, he was whisked away from Berea and brought there. As he waited for Silas and Timothy, he began to take in some of the city. While Athens was in Paul's day a mere shadow of its former glory in its golden age in the Fourth and Fifth Century B.C., she was still considered the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire. Athens was known the world over for its magnificent art and architecture. The art portrayed the exploits of various gods and goddesses of the Greek Pantheon, while most of the buildings were temples to the pagan gods.

Paul was a Jew – and remembering the first and second commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in heaven above or in earth beneath or in the water underneath the earth” – he is provoked at the sight of the idols – infuriated. Paul resumed his normal pattern of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath to preach to interested Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. But each day during the week, he shared his faith in the agora – the famous market place at the hub of Athenian life. It was here, as described in verse 18, that he had his encounters with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. These two philosophic schools dominated the city's thought. The Epicureans asserted that happiness and pleasure were the two principle aims of a tranquil life. They believed that everything happened by chance. The gods were remote and uninvolved, so there was no need for concern or anxiety. Life was to be lived free of passion, pain, and fear of any kind. Three cardinal words focus their life style: eat, drink, and be merry.

The Stoics, like their founder Zeno, taught a way of life that could not possibly be more opposite than the Epicureans. For them, all of life was determined by the gods. It had to be lived according to the laws of nature, completely free of emotional involvement. The Stoic's goal was to accept nature and live in it without intensity. They were Pantheistic, seeing all as an expression of their gods.

They called Paul a babblers, a spermalogos – a seed speaker – which evoked images of a bird pecking indiscriminately at the seeds in a barnyard. They could not understand Paul's concept of the resurrection at all. Epicureans did not believe in any existence after death, and Stoics believed that only the soul, the divine spark, survived death. So what was this idea of a bodily resurrection? He must be speaking of a new goddess named Resurrection – along with this new god Jesus he keeps talking about.

They really missed Paul altogether, didn't they? Paul was not a gatherer of bits of thought, but a man with one central thought. Paul finds himself standing before the Areopagus, the same court that had tried and condemned Socrates to death centuries before. Now that Athens was democratic, the power of the courts was limited to a sort of philosophic review board for the intellectual and moral quality of the city. Before the court, which met on Mars Hill, Paul used the opportunity to communicate the message of the gospel.

“Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.” As Paul had been provoked, angered, infuriated – as he walked around and looked again and again at all their objects, their idols of worship – he found an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” Diogenes' *The Lives of the Philosophers* gives us the reason for their origin. Athens was once plagued by pestilence in the Sixth Century B.C., and the city rulers had exhausted all their strategies to abate it. They sent to Crete asking the prophet Epimenides to come and help. His remedy was to drive a herd of black and white sheep away from the Areopagus, and wherever they laid down to sacrifice them to the god of that place. The plague was stayed. And Diogenes says that memorial altars, with no god's name inscribed on them, may consequently be found throughout Attica.

Paul tried to point home. What they worship as something as unknown, they worship being ignorant, he will proclaim or explain to them. He proceeded to tell them who God really is. He is the Creator, the source of all life, the One who guides all history and on whom all life depends. Paul quotes their own poet, “In him we live and move and have a being.” Making references to their own poets, Paul moves on to his target – Jesus Christ, in whom the Living God has been revealed. Through Him all the world will be judged. His authority has been validated in having been raised from the dead. And Paul, once again, comes to the topic of the resurrection. That is all his hearers were willing to consider.

While Luke can tell us that all the Athenians and foreigners spent their time doing nothing else but telling and listening to something new, this was too new – too specific for either the Epicureans or the Stoics. Some mocked, others put him off. But some accepted.

Paul goes to the point of no return. He's covered the revelation of God from creation to the resurrection. He came to the point where the decision had to be made. The response of the

hearers we find in verses 32-34. It's important because these options are the only options that still face men today as they ponder, as they face, the resurrection of Jesus. We can laugh it off, put it off, or take it in.

Paul had proclaimed the message of repentance, the message of judgment, the fixed day of the Great Day of the Lord – the resurrection from the dead as proof. And some of them began – notice verse 32 – to sneer.

## **I. WE CAN LAUGH IT OFF**

Your translation may have the word “mocked.” They sneered, they mocked, they made fun of him. With their academic achievements and intellectual prowess, they were unable to understand the simplicity of the gospel. Because they were unable to understand, they made fun of it. They mocked. Every generation – and ours is no exception – has mockers, those who make fun and make light of the Gospel.

**Fred Craddock tells a story about some fraternity brothers who had planned to do their fraternity skit as a parody of evangelical religion. Each fraternity brother had his role: some were the “amen” corner, one led the music, and one was the preacher.**

**They were practicing in the drama hall of the university, and they acted out the skit, preaching on sin – hot, hell, fiery! “Amen, alleluia,” the fraternity brothers cried out from their seats. When the “preacher” gave the invitation again in mockery, a janitor in the auditorium came forward and knelt, asking for forgiveness.**

**You see, the power is in the message, not the messenger. You might mock the messenger, but the message is powerful.**

In a sermon by General William Boothe, he said, **“If you ever go to hell, keep your eyes open for a man huddled in the corner counting. You’ll hear him. ‘One, two, three...twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.’ Then you’ll understand. That’s Judas, counting his thirty pieces of silver. You’ll hear him muttering to himself, ‘I sold Him for thirty pieces of silver.’ The truth of the matter is that Judas didn’t sell Jesus. For thirty pieces of silver, Judas sold himself. He made the mistake he wouldn’t admit. And now, through all of eternity, he counts his silver. If you ever go to hell, you’ll see Judas. And he’ll come over to you and say, ‘Here’s what I sold Him for.’ And then he’ll show you his silver. He’ll look you in the eyes and say, ‘Here’s what I sold Him for. What price did you command for your soul?’”**

Judas wanted a god who made good business sense. The philosophers of the Areopagus wanted a god that made intellectual sense. What kind of god are you looking for? The turning point in your life will come when you stop thinking of the god you want, and start seeking the God who is, the God of scripture.

## **II. WE CAN PUT IT OFF**

There's another way – for some in the crowd that day as Paul preached in the Areopagus – there is another way they responded on that day. And there is another way you'll respond on this day – some of you here in the congregation, some of you by way of television. In fact, I think it's the most dangerous response to the gospel of all – even more dangerous, believe it or not, than mocking.

People like to think they're in control of their own lives, their own calendar. The most common of the excuses we hear for putting off the decision of committing one's life to Christ –

I am waiting – waiting for something. Waiting to clean up my life – changes I need to make first. There are people here, people listening and watching, people who need to make decisions about Jesus Christ. Some of you need to come and just profess Him publicly as your Lord and Savior. Jesus has no secret disciples. Some of you need to schedule your baptism – you've put it off. You're waiting. Some need to come and join the church. As a Christian, you need to be part of God's army, doing the thing that God wants you to do. Some of you need to rededicate your lives. You've lived publicly in such a way that casts doubt on your faith in Christ. So, publicly, you want to say, "I will be an exclamation point for Him. I want to love Him and serve Him." Maybe God has called you to a particular task in Kingdom service, and you would share that. God wants you to. There are people here today – today – who need to make decisions. I know there are people here who need to make decisions. You know what your decision needs to be – you already know what God is calling you to do, but you simply put it off.

Not only do you need to make a decision, and not only do you know what that decision really is, but you know, thirdly, you intend to make that decision. As Frank Pollard says, **"Is there anyone here who doesn't want their life to please God? Is there anyone here who does not want to leave this world as a Christian and go to heaven for eternity? Is there anyone here who doesn't want his life to be filled with peace that passes understanding, with joy unspeakable and imbued with a power from on high that God promises to those who give their lives to Him?"** I think not. Oh, I believe you intend to do it, but unless you are keenly convicted or spiritually blessed with insight and wisdom, you probably don't intend to do it today. And when you postpone, you gamble. You gamble with your destiny. You gamble with your life. And you gamble with other people's lives – lives that you ought to be influencing. You do something to yourself when you say, **"No, not now, later on, one day, maybe next Sunday. I'm going to do it. I know I need to do it. But not today."**

But what awful indecision. Some of you are so indecisive you remind me of Dr. Seuss' Zoad.

**Did I ever tell you about the young Zoad  
Who came to two signs at a fork in the road?  
One said, "To Place One," and the other, "To Place Two."  
So the Zoad had to make up his mind what to do.**

**Well, the Zoad scratched his head and his chin and his pants,  
And he said to himself, "Now, I'll be taking a chance.  
"If I go to Place One, that place may be hot.  
"So how do I know if I like it or not?"**

**“On the other hand, though I’ll feel such a fool  
“If I go to Place Two and I find it’s too cool.  
“In that case, I may catch a chill and turn blue.  
“So Place One may be the best – not Place Two.**

**“On the other hand, though, if Place One is too high,  
“I might get a terrible earache and die.  
“On the other hand, though, if Place Two is too low,  
“I could get some terribly strange pain in my toe.  
“So Place One may be the best.”**

**So he started to go, and he stopped and he said,  
“On the other hand – on the other hand, other hand, other hand...”  
And for thirty-six hours and one-half,  
That Zoad made starts and made stops at that fork in the road,  
Saying, “No, don’t take a chance. You may not be right.”  
Then he got an idea which was wonderfully bright.  
“Play safe,” cried the Zoad. “I’ll play safe. I’m no dunce.  
“I’ll simply start off to both places at once.”**

**And that’s how the Zoad, who would not take a chance,  
went no place at all with a split in his pants.**

We may argue that we do not have all the information we need to make a decision. We may never have all the information. We’re always going to accept Jesus tomorrow.

Today, the Lord declares, is the day of salvation. Will you come to him?

### **III. WE CAN TAKE IT IN**

There was a third response made that day when Paul preached before the Areopagus. There’s a third choice before us today.

Notice verse 34.

Some men joined him and believed, among them also was Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Two believers here in Athens. One male, another, a female. The Areopagus council consisted of about 30 members, according to the best evidence. Dionysius, even if he were the only convert from among the court, would have made Paul’s sermon all the worthwhile.

Paul was determined to preach the gospel, to preach Christ, and to preach Him crucified. The climax of the sermon is the resurrection of Christ. It received predictable responses then, and it receives predictable responses now. Some mocked, some put off, and some took it in.

How are you going to respond today? The fate of those in the Areopagus is already sealed. They have for 2,000 years now been at their point of eternal destiny. They cannot go back and change their decision. They cannot listen more carefully. They cannot ponder Paul's preaching. But for you, today, it's not too late. You have that opportunity – the opportunity to say yes. Yes, I believe that Jesus was the Son of God. Yes, I believe that He died on the cross for my sins. Yes, I believe that He was resurrected bodily from the dead. And yes, I believe that one day He will come again for those who believe in Him.

You see, there's no one within the sound of my voice who needs to make a decision who can do other than the three things I've described today. Some of you will mock, jeer and sneer. Some of you – most of you – will say, "No, not today," thinking you are the captain of your soul, the creator of your own calendar, the designer of your own death. And yes, some of you will believe.