



The door opened and the bailiff stepped through. *Knock, knock, knock.* “All rise!” Those gathered rose to their feet as the judge entered and settled in his seat. The crowd then settled back down and waited for things to begin.

The judge rustled his papers, looked over the tops of his glasses and said: “The court calls the case of Paul, an Apostle, vs. the Men of Athens. You may begin,” nodding to the man.

The man rose, tall and lean. Hair and beard neatly trimmed. Clearly in his best clothes. And he began to speak:

“May it please the court, ladies and gentlemen of the areopagus. Men of Athens, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription ‘To an unknown God.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands. Nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since He himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him. Though indeed he is 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, too, are his offspring.’ Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent. Because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

With this, Paul sat down, his head bowed. Praying, perhaps, that his words might be heard and understood by those present.

Acts 17: 22-31; Ps. 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Then, after a few moments of silence, the judge said: “I see that the men of Athens have appointed the Stoics and Epicureans to speak for you. What say you, Stoics and Epicureans?”

The Stoic stood and said: “We believe that everything that happens is the natural result of divine will or the natural order. God determines everything for the best and virtue is sufficient for happiness. Therefore, the appropriate response is to calmly accept what happens to you – good or bad.”<sup>1</sup>

The Epicurean jumped up and said: “No, no, that’s not right. The highest good is the pursuit of pleasure – and especially good food and drink.<sup>2</sup> There’s no need for a god.”

Paul looked over at them in amazement. He stood and began once again to speak. “But if what you say is true, then why the altar to an unknown God? If all you need to do is calmly accept what life hands to you, what does it matter that you are virtuous? If all you have to do is calmly accept what life hands to you because God determines everything for the best, where is God when people who die in earthquakes or fires?”

And, you, Epicurean, you are the one about whom it can be said” Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” What a fatalistic outlook. Is there no hope for a better life and a better way of being?

I tell you that your hearts will be restless until they rest in the God who made the world and all that is in it. Your heart will search and search for a relationship with a living God – Not a god of stone or metal or made of human hands.

My speech here is shaped by what God has done in my life. God called to me on the road to Damascus. I was blind and then I saw. This God wants a relationship with me. Not to be a self-righteous person, believing and depending upon my own interpretations and decisions, but a relationship where I acknowledge that this God – the one who sent Jesus to be incarnate the one who raised Jesus from the dead as a witness to God’s power and presence,

This God counts me as important. This is the God in whom I live and move and have my being. This God calls me by name. This is a God in whom I can rest with assurance. My testimony is shaped by who and what God is. And who I am in response to God.

The altar to an unknown God is really an altar to an unknowable God. God is more than we can imagine. More than we have words to speak about. This God cannot be fully defined – cannot be put into a box –For God is more than that. In this God, the one you called unknown, we can rest with confidence. The hole in our heart can be filled with the knowledge that this God truly cares about me. Truly wants me to repent – To turn from sin. To turn towards a life based upon a relationship with God, a life that treats others with love and compassion.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/stoic> May 29, 2011

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/epicurean> May 29, 2011

Acts 17: 22-31; Ps. 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

As your own poets have said, we are God's offspring. God gave us life. God expects us to live that life with honor and integrity – and yes, Stoics, with virtue. But we are not to be passive. We are to be in the world working for peace and justice among all peoples. We are to feed and clothe those who are hungry or naked. We are to care for those who are sick.

Each of us is the offspring of God. Each of us is related to each other through our creation by God. God is not far from us. God did not set this world in motion and then leave us be, like a clockmaker who wound the clock and then walked away. This is a God who is present with us even in the midst of earthquakes, fires and all other forms of natural and man-made disasters.

This is a God who cares that you grope for God. Like walking into a dark room with only a single candle that smallest light can bring light to all.

My testimony is “shaped by what God has done in my life.”<sup>3</sup> It is particular to me but it is applicable to you. My testimony is given with honesty and with humility in hopes that you will hear and come to believe in the one, holy and apostolic God.

Your story will be different because you and I are different. But we are both offspring of the same God. Your testimony will also be shaped by what God has done in your life.

Altars give us a place to be fully present to the God that has given us life. Altars are not where God resides. Altars can give us a focus where we can be quiet and pray. But altars themselves do not contain God. God lives in you and in me. God is alive and not confined by time or space. This is the good news.”

And Paul sat down and prayed that his words would find root in the hearts and minds of those present. And some, as is to be expected, mocked and dismissed what Paul had said. But some believed.

And after a moment, the judge spoke. “I'll take what you have said under advisement. I'll let you know my ruling next week.” And slowly, thoughtfully, the bailiff got to his feet and said, “All rise.” And the bailiff opened the door and the judge and the bailiff passed through. Those present also sat in silence pondering what they had heard. And some believed. *Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas L. Are, Jr. in Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 2. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 482.