

# Gospel Conversations — Week 4: Reason and the Scandal of the Cross

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- What are the elements of coming to faith? God-shaped hole; crisis; longing; the message of the truth; loving witness/relationship; regeneration; time
  - Both/and: Propositions *and* narratives; Truth *and* love; Meeting physical *and* spiritual needs; Conversion *and* ongoing discipleship
- We've seen so far:
  - Ruth; Naaman the Aramean
  - Jesus and the Jewish People (Jn 8:31–59)
  - Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)
  - Peter, Stephen and Paul speak to Jewish audiences (Acts 2; 7; 13)
  - Paul in Synagogues
  - Paul speaking to uneducated Gentiles
  - Foundationalism versus coherentism
  - Rom 1:18–32 suppression of truth

Paul at Athens (Acts 17:16–34)

- Outline
  - 16–17 Paul, distressed by the idols, begins talking with the Jews and God-fearers
  - 18 Paul talks to philosophers who are also there
  - 19–21 Philosophers bring Paul to the Areopagus (Hill of Aries/Mars) to explain
  - 22–23 “Men of Athens...you are very religious/superstitious”; altar to the unknown god. Is Paul commending, criticizing, or sharing an inside elitist joke?<sup>1</sup>
  - 24–28 Paul explains the one Creator God
  - 29–31 Humanity in the image of God, our relationship to him
  - 32–34 “Resurrection” is a turnoff for most, but a few believe
- Who were the different groups in Paul's audience?
  - 17 Jews and “devout persons”
  - 18 Epicurean philosophers – “affirms a materialistic worldview and considers pleasure the greatest good in life. One achieves this pleasure not by self-gratification but by living modestly, gaining knowledge about the world, and limiting one's desires.”<sup>2</sup>
  - 18 Stoic philosophers – “founded by Zeno in the third century BC, is pantheistic, believing in the divinity and unity of all things. Stoics seek to maintain harmony with nature and to avoid all destructive emotions.”<sup>3</sup>
  - Philosophers misunderstand Paul: “They take Resurrection, *Anastasis*, as a feminine name and suppose that Paul preaches a male-female dyad, a common way of viewing deities in this period. Popular religion deemed many philosophers, unlike the Stoics,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://thinkhardthinkwell.com/2010/09/11/paul-in-the-seat-of-mockers>

<sup>2</sup> Zondervan NIV Study Bible

<sup>3</sup> Zondervan NIV Study Bible

irreligious for rejecting conventional Greek religion, though most philosophers allowed the value of traditional religion for the masses.”<sup>4</sup>

- 16 Greek public, mostly non-exclusive polytheists
- 22 Athenian leaders, mainly Stoic-friendly – “The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who brought Paul to the Areopagus (17:18–19) will not be interested in altars (17:23; see notes on 17:24 and 25), though Stoics would consider themselves devout (17:22). By contrast, members of the Areopagus, being civic officials, would be publicly supportive of Athens’ civic religion, which was inseparable from civic pride.”<sup>5</sup>
- What misunderstandings do the people display? What is the “good news” for each group?
  - 24 There are many gods vs. one God
  - 24–28 God is either transcendent or immanent vs. actually, both
  - Human beings created separately by individual gods vs. all humans descended from one man created in the image of the one God
  - Ethnic groups should all continue in their own ways vs. actually, God allowed this but now summons all peoples to repentance
  - Death is the end of the body and liberation of the soul vs. actually, God is incarnate and was resurrected, so humans will also receive resurrection bodies?
- What is the result?

#### Other Relevant Scriptures

- Romans 2:1–16 – “Puzzled pagan moralist”?
  - 1–5 Try as you might, you can’t avoid God’s judgment upon sin
  - 6–11 God will render judgment impartially, not favoring Jews over Gentiles
  - 12–16 Jews should know the law; Gentiles do also, the law written on their hearts (which they both appeal to and ignore to self-excuse!)
- 1 Cor 1:18–2:16 – The wisdom of the world and the scandal of the cross and the resurrection
  - 1:23 Why is Christ crucified “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”?
  - Respectability anxiety (example: Molly Worthen<sup>6</sup>)

What do these stories teach us about how to have gospel conversations? Can you think of some examples? Who are the “puzzled pagan moralists” of today? Who are the Stoics and Epicureans? Who are the gnostics and the hedonists and the cynics? What does Christian faith have to offer each?

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<sup>4</sup> Zondervan NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (pp. 9655-9656). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Zondervan NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (p. 9657). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2023/05/the-evangelical-conversion-narrative-of-molly-worthen>