

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 18, Acts 17

6-Min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's get into it. We're heading back to ancient Athens for this incredible story, a moment where two totally different worldviews just smash into each other. So, I want you to picture Athens for a second.

This was the global hub for philosophy. I mean, this is the city that gave us Socrates and Plato, right? It had this reputation, this vibe of being the smartest, most intellectual place on the entire planet. So, what happens when a brand new, truly disruptive idea shows up in a place like that? Well, that's what this is all about.

It's about this one moment, when a fugitive intellectual named Paul shows up and brings a message that's about to shake everything up for the world's most sophisticated audience. Okay, first things first, let's set the scene. The apostle Paul, he's not in Athens on some kind of academic tour.

No way. The guy's a fugitive. He's literally on the run, looking for a safe place to land after his message caused actual riots in other cities.

So, Paul's walking through the streets of Athens. And what does he see? Temples and statues, just everywhere. And as Dr. Keener points out in his analysis, his spirit was, and I quote, stirred within him by this idolatry in a supposedly intellectual place.

You can just feel the tension, right? This massive contradiction he just couldn't ignore. So, does Paul just keep his thoughts to himself? Nope. He heads straight for the Agora, which is basically the big public marketplace, the hub of the city, and he just starts debating with anyone and everyone who will listen.

And that includes, of course, the local brainiacs. And he mainly runs into two big philosophical groups there. You've got the Epicureans on one hand.

Their whole thing was that the gods were way out there, totally uninvolved in human life, and the goal was just to find tranquility. Basically, a life without pain or trouble. Then you had the Stoics.

They were way more popular, and their belief was that the whole universe was guided by this divine logic, and that living a virtuous life was the absolute highest goal. So, how do these philosophers react to Paul? Well, it's total dismissal. They call him a spermologos.

Literally, that means a seed picker, like a bird pecking at scraps. It was a major insult. They were basically calling him an intellectual lightweight, a babblers who just picks up random ideas without really understanding any of them.

And on top of that, they completely misunderstand what he's even talking about. He's there preaching about Jesus and Anastasis. Now, Anastasis is just the Greek word for resurrection.

But to them, they hear those two words and think he's trying to introduce two brand new gods, a male god named Jesus and a female goddess named Anastasis. It's a huge mix-up. Now, this is where it gets really interesting.

Because introducing foreign gods wasn't just a quirky idea in Athens, it was a dangerous accusation. I mean, this is the very same charge that got their own hero Socrates condemned to death hundreds of years earlier. You can't miss the historical echo here.

The stakes were high. So, now they're intrigued, and maybe a little bit concerned. So, they take Paul and bring him to the Areopagus.

This was the high council of Athens, the big leagues. This is it. His one shot to make his case to the city's top intellectual minds.

And what Paul does next is just a masterclass in communication. He doesn't come out swinging and attacking their beliefs. No.

He starts by building a bridge. He finds this point of connection. He says he saw an altar in their city dedicated to an unknown god, and he uses that as his starting point.

He even quotes their own Greek poets. He's showing them, hey, I've done my homework. I understand your world.

He builds on ideas they'd actually agree with, like the fact that the true creator doesn't live in man-made temples. And it's only after he's laid all this groundwork, all this common ground, that he finally pivots to the really challenging part of his message. He tells them that this unknown god they worship is actually the one who's going to judge the world.

And the proof? The proof is that God raised a man from the dead. And boom, right there, with that one concept, resurrection, that bridge he just built, for a lot of them, it just shatters. So you have to ask, why was this so shocking? Why was this the deal breaker? Well, for a lot of Greek philosophers, the body was seen as a prison for the soul.

They had this phrase, soma sema. It literally means, the body is a tomb. The whole goal of life and death was for your soul to finally escape the physical body.

So the idea of a bodily resurrection, getting that body back, it wasn't just weird. To them, it was a step in the wrong direction. It was completely undesirable.

So you can probably guess what happens next. Paul's speech did not win everybody over. I mean, not even close.

The reaction was completely and totally divided. You had one group that just openly laughed at him, mocked him right there. Then there was another group that was, you know, intrigued.

They were like, okay, this is weird, but we want to hear more about this later. And then, and this is key, a small but really significant group was convinced right then and there. And get this, this part is stunning.

Among those few people who believed him was a man named Dionysius. And who was he? He was a member of the Areopagus Council itself. One of the very judges sitting there listening to his case became a follower.

Think about that. A high-status elite leader was won over by the guy they had just dismissed as a babbling foreigner. So, okay, what's the big takeaway here? What can we learn from this ancient intellectual showdown on Mars Hill? Well, it's really a masterclass in how to communicate across deep divides.

Paul showed the power of meeting people where they are. He stepped into their world; he used their culture, their poetry, their ideas to build that bridge of understanding. But, and this is so important, building the bridge didn't mean he changed where he was going.

He never ever compromised on his core non-negotiable message, which was the And that whole encounter on Mars Hill leaves us with this really powerful question. One that is just as relevant today in our own divided world as it was back then. How do you find common ground? How do you build that bridge to someone who sees the world in a completely different way without losing the message that's most important to you?