

EMPOWERED TO SPEAK TO THE WORLD Acts 17:16–34

INTRODUCTION

For several weeks now, one question has been quietly building on top of another as we've walked through Acts together.

We started by asking, "Is God still speaking?" And the answer, again and again, has been yes. Then we asked something sharper: "If God is still speaking, are we listening?" Then sharper still: "God is still speaking — but are we actually hearing what He is saying?"

This morning I want to add the next question in that line, because I believe it's the one Acts 17 is asking us to sit with. **God is still speaking. And now, He does it through us. So the question becomes: what does He want us to say — and to whom?**

That question gets harder the moment we open Acts 17, because Paul is no longer in familiar territory. Every place we've visited with him so far — Jerusalem, Antioch, even the Philippian jail — has been a place where people already had some category for God. The jailer knew what gods were. The synagogue knew the Scriptures. Even the pagans he'd met before shared some baseline assumption that unseen powers existed and mattered.

Athens is different. Athens is a marketplace of a thousand gods, a city that has heard every religious claim under the sun and has largely stopped being scandalized by any of them. It's sophisticated, philosophical, curious, and thoroughly unconvinced that any one god deserves the whole conversation.

If that sounds familiar, it should. That's not Rome. That's San Bruno. That's today's America. That's most of the Western world in 2026.

The folks watching online may not know — that alongside pastoring St. John's, I still work as a flight attendant, including regular flights to Germany. And some of the most honest conversations I have happen not in this building, but on the jumpseat, in the middle of the night, in between services, thirty-five thousand feet over the Atlantic.

Over the past few years, I've had the same conversation, in one form or another, with more coworkers than I can count. They grew up in church. Some of them grew up in very serious, very committed church families. And almost every one of them tells some version of the same story: somewhere along the way they brought a real question — about suffering, about science, about a friend who was gay, about why God allowed something painful in their life — and instead of being met with patience, they were met with a brush-off. "Just have faith." "Don't ask that." "That's not for you to understand." So they stopped asking the questions out loud. And eventually, they just stopped believing at all.

That's not the same thing as the mocking philosophers of Athens. These aren't people who never cared. These are people who used to belong, who trusted the church enough to bring it their honest doubts, and who left not because the questions were unanswerable, but because the church they knew never really tried.

And here's where I want to be honest with you before we go any further, because I think it matters for how we read this whole passage.

A lot has been said about our culture "walking away" from Christianity. I hear it lamented constantly — as if the only explanation is that people got harder-hearted, or more secular, or more hostile to truth. And sometimes that's true. The gospel has always been an offense to some. Paul knew that.

But I don't believe that's the whole story, and I don't think we're allowed to pretend it is. Because for a long time, especially here in America, the church did not primarily speak to the world the way Paul speaks in Acts 17 — as a guest in the marketplace, without power, without coercion, simply reasoning and pointing to Christ. Too often the church spoke from a position of political power. We reached for Caesar's tools — legislation, cultural dominance, the assumption that Christianity should simply *rule* — instead of Paul's tools: presence, respect, humility, and truth spoken freely in a public square where we had no authority to compel anyone to listen.

I think a great deal of the disengagement we're grieving isn't disengagement from Jesus. It's disengagement from a version of Christianity that tried to win by force what it was only ever supposed to win by love.

That's not a comfortable place to begin. But Acts 17 won't let us begin anywhere else. Because here, in one of the most important scenes in the entire book, Paul walks into a hostile intellectual capital with absolutely no institutional power — and he still changes the conversation forever. Not by demanding ground. By entering it.

So this morning, three things the Holy Spirit empowers us to do in a culture like Athens — and a culture like ours.

I. EMPOWERED TO ENGAGE RATHER THAN WITHDRAW OR CONDEMN (vv. 16–21)

Luke tells us that as Paul waited in Athens, his spirit was "provoked" within him as he saw the city full of idols. Some translations say he was "greatly distressed." That word matters, because it's easy to misread it as disgust. It isn't. It's grief.

There's a real difference between those two responses, and it shapes everything that follows. Disgust pulls back. Disgust says, "I want nothing to do with this." Grief moves toward the very thing that's breaking your heart. Paul isn't repulsed by Athens. He's grieved for it. He sees a city drowning in substitutes for the living God, and it wounds something in him — not because he feels superior to it, but because he loves the people caught inside it.

That distinction matters for us, because I think both of the obvious responses to a skeptical culture are actually temptations, not faithfulness.

The first temptation is withdrawal. It's the quiet decision that the culture is too far gone, too hostile, too different from us to be worth engaging — so we simply close the doors, turn inward, and preserve what we have among ourselves. For a church our size, that temptation is real. It is so much easier to retreat into a comfortable, familiar circle than to keep walking into a public square that doesn't share our assumptions.

The second temptation is the one I named a few minutes ago — the temptation not to withdraw from culture, but to try to *conquer* it. To treat the public square as territory to be won rather than people to be loved. To reach for power, platform, and political leverage instead of presence and grief.

Paul does neither. Luke tells us he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons, and *every day* in the marketplace with whoever happened to be there. Every day. Not once, as a stunt. Not from a distance, through a pamphlet or a decree. In the actual marketplace, in actual conversation, with actual people — including Epicureans and Stoics, two philosophical schools that disagreed with each other about almost everything, and disagreed with Paul about the rest.

That's what empowered engagement looks like. Showing up. Staying in the conversation. Being willing to be misunderstood, mocked even — Luke tells us some called him a "babbler," which literally meant something like a seed-picker, a scavenger with borrowed ideas — and staying anyway.

We have a small picture of this happening right here at St. John's, and I don't think we talk about it enough. A congregation of eight active members keeps a blessing box running — a no-questions-asked food pantry, restocked week after week, open to anyone who walks up regardless of who they are, what they believe, or how they ended up hungry. Honestly, for a church our size, it's a herculean task. Some weeks I genuinely don't know how we keep it stocked. But it's making a real difference, because it meets people exactly where Paul met Athens — not where we wish they were, but where they actually are.

And it provokes conversations I don't get anywhere else. I've had people standing at that box, people who are hungry and grieving the direction their life has taken, ask me something like, "If God is as loving as you say He is, why am I suffering this much?" That is not a comfortable question to be asked in a parking lot. It would be so much easier to hand someone a can of soup and a Bible verse and move on. But that question is an altar to an unknown god. It's someone standing in front of real pain, already wrestling with whether God is real and whether He cares, already searching — and the only faithful response is to stay in it with them, the way Paul stayed in the Areopagus, rather than brushing it aside the way so many of my jumpseat friends were brushed aside years ago.

II. EMPOWERED TO BUILD BRIDGES INSTEAD OF DEMANDING GROUND (vv. 22–28)

When Paul finally stands before the Areopagus — Athens' council for exactly this kind of new religious and philosophical claim — watch how he begins. He does not begin with condemnation. He does not walk in and announce everything wrong with Athenian religion. He says, "Athenians, I see that in every way you are very religious." That's not sarcasm. He means it. He has walked their streets. He has noticed their altars. He has read, apparently, their poets — because a few verses later he quotes them approvingly: "In him we live and move and have our being," and "we are indeed his offspring," lines from their own philosophers and poets, not from Scripture.

Then he does something remarkable. He finds an altar inscribed "To an unknown god" — Athens' way of covering its bases, making sure no deity went unworshipped and unappeased — and instead of mocking their superstition, he uses it as a door. "What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you."

Do you see what he's doing? He is not conceding that all religions are equally true. He's about to say something very specific and very exclusive about the God who made heaven and earth, who doesn't live in temples, who isn't served by human hands. But he starts by finding what is true and searching in what they already believe, and he walks through that door toward Christ rather than kicking it down.

That is bridge-building. And I want to be careful here, because bridge-building gets a bad reputation among some Christians, as if finding common ground with someone is itself a compromise of the gospel. It isn't. Paul doesn't lower his convictions one inch to build this bridge. He simply refuses to begin the conversation by making his neighbor the enemy.

This is the alternative to the playbook so much of American Christianity adopted instead. Rather than asking the culture to submit to Christian authority — rather than trying to legislate belief or shame people into agreement — Paul asks Athens a question Athens is already asking itself, and walks it toward the answer only Christ can give. He doesn't need Caesar's permission. He doesn't need political power. He needs only truth, spoken with respect, in a public square where he has no leverage at all except the truth itself.

When I began ministry in the Assemblies of God, I was convinced I already knew what needed to be known about God. I treated the Bible less like a living word and more like an encyclopedia — a set of facts to back up conclusions I had already reached before the conversation even started. I could quote chapter and verse for almost anything. What I couldn't do, if I'm honest, was listen.

Somewhere along the way, sharing my faith had quietly turned into something else: sharing my knowledge, and expecting everyone else to relate to God the same way I did — through certainty, through argument, through being right. I wasn't building bridges. I was handing people a finished product and wondering why they didn't want it.

It's taken years, and I'm still not finished, but the Lord had to grow something in me that doesn't come naturally to a young, certain preacher — the fruit of self-control. Not self-control over anger or appetite, but self-control over my own mouth. The discipline to be quiet long enough to actually hear someone else's story. To see the world, even for a moment, the way they see it, before I ever said a word about how I see it. And only then — only when the Lord opened the door — to share the gospel in a way that could actually be heard, because it had finally become relatable instead of just correct.

That's what I see Paul doing here. He doesn't walk into the Areopagus with a finished product and hand it over. He's clearly been listening — to their poets, to their altars, to what they already believe — long before he ever opens his mouth to correct anything.

I think this is exactly the invitation in front of St. John's. Not: how do we get our culture to agree with us again. Not: how do we recover the influence the church once had. But: where are the altars "to an unknown god" already standing in San Bruno? Where is our community already reaching, already searching, already building shrines to things it hopes will save it — and how do we walk through that door toward Jesus, rather than past our neighbors toward some argument we'd rather win?

III. EMPOWERED TO PROCLAIM TRUTH AND RELEASE THE RESULTS (vv. 29–34)

Here is where I want to make sure we don't misunderstand what Paul is doing. Bridges are a doorway. They are not the destination.

Because after all that common ground, after quoting their poets and honoring their search, Paul does not stop at "we're all spiritual people looking for the same thing." He moves directly to the specific, unapologetic claims of the gospel: that God commands all people everywhere to repent; that He has fixed

a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness; and that He has given proof of this to everyone by raising a man from the dead.

That last line is where the room turns. Resurrection was, for the Greek philosophical mind, close to nonsense — the body was something to escape, not something to be raised. Some of the crowd start sneering right there. Others, more politely, say, "We will hear you again about this" — which is Athens' gracious way of ending a conversation without actually continuing it later.

And a few believe. Luke names two of them — Dionysius, a member of the council itself, and a woman named Damaris — "and others with them."

I want you to notice how differently this ends compared to Pentecost, where three thousand responded in a single day. Here it's a mixed room: mockery, polite deferral, and a handful of genuine converts. No earthquake. No mass response. No forced outcome.

And Paul doesn't seem anxious about that. He doesn't chase down the sneering philosophers to win the argument. He doesn't spend the next chapter agonizing over Athens' underwhelming response. He preaches the truth plainly, trusts the Spirit with the harvest, and moves on to Corinth.

That is such good news for a congregation like ours. Faithfulness was never measured by whether everyone said yes. It never has been, not even for Paul in one of the most important sermons of his life. Our job is not to manufacture a result. Our job is to speak what is true, in love, without coercion — and then to release the outcome into hands stronger than ours.

CONCLUSION & INVITATION

So let's come back to where we started. God is still speaking. We've asked whether we're listening. We've asked whether we're actually hearing Him. This morning the question turns toward us directly: God is still speaking — and now He does it through us. What does He want us to say?

I don't think the answer is a script. I don't think it's a set of talking points or a strategy for winning arguments. I think Acts 17 tells us the answer is a posture: grief instead of disgust, engagement instead of withdrawal, bridges instead of demands, truth spoken plainly instead of truth imposed by force — and then open hands, trusting God with whatever comes next.

And if some of our neighbors have grown skeptical of the church, I think we have to be honest enough to admit that some of that skepticism was earned — not because the gospel offended them, but because too often we reached for power when we should have reached for presence, for control when we should have offered respect, for Caesar's tools when we only ever needed Paul's.

That's not a reason for shame. It's an invitation to something better. The same Holy Spirit who gave Paul the words for the Areopagus is still available to us in the marketplace, in the break room, at the dinner table, in the comment section — wherever our own Athens happens to be this week.

So let me leave you with the question underneath all of this. Where is your Athens? Where is the place — a friendship, a family conversation, a corner of your life — where you've quietly decided the gap is too wide, the other person too far gone, the conversation not worth having?

Maybe the Spirit is asking you to enter that conversation instead of avoiding it. Maybe He's asking you to lay down the need to win it. Maybe He's simply asking you to notice the altar "to an unknown god" already standing in someone else's life, and to gently, respectfully, lovingly show them what — or who — they've been searching for all along.

God is still speaking. And this morning, He is asking to speak through you.

Let us pray...