

Respectful disagreement before the Creator

In Acts 17:16–34, Paul enters a conversation whose participants do not begin where Timothy begins. Athens has religious objects, philosophical discussion and curiosity about new ideas. Paul sees idols and is deeply distressed. Yet he pays attention to the people and to what they are saying. The question is searching: how can he take their beliefs seriously enough to understand them while proclaiming a truth that challenges those beliefs?

Luke lets us follow the answer. Paul begins with something his hearers recognise, then takes them through an argument about the Creator, the life we receive from Him and the risen Jesus before whom we are accountable. As you prepare, listen for both the generosity and the challenge. This is how the unit's teaching about revelation reaches a real conversation: people deserve careful attention, and God's truth deserves to be spoken clearly.

Estimated reading time: 19 minutes

Scriptures: Acts 17:16–34

Focus statement: The Creator gives life to all and calls everyone to repent before the risen Judge, so we should weigh beliefs by his revelation and speak with truthful respect.

What learners should understand: Name one point of contact and one contradiction in Paul's address, and defend a gracious response.

MEMORY VERSE

²⁵ Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.

Acts 17:25, CSB

Meet Paul's listeners in Athens

Read Acts 17:16–34 in full. Notice what Paul sees, where he reasons, what he has already been proclaiming and why his hearers ask for an explanation. Then read verses 22–31 as one argument. Follow the movement from the unknown-god altar to the God who made everything, from our dependence to the rejection of manufactured gods, and from ignorance to the command to repent. The resurrection is the conclusion towards which the address moves, not an optional detail added after a general discussion of religion.

Read Luke 24:36–49 to recall the bodily resurrection and the proclamation of repentance for forgiveness in Jesus' name. Romans 3:21–26 explains how Christ's sacrifice makes forgiveness consistent with God's justice. These passages supply background the Athenian hearers and our learners may not yet know. Introduce it here rather than assuming an earlier lesson has established it. Our memory verse is Acts 17:25: the Creator gives life and breath; our service never supplies a lack in Him.

Paul has travelled from Thessalonica to Berea, and then to Athens after opposition follows him (Acts 17:1–15). He is waiting for Silas and Timothy. While he waits, he speaks in the synagogue and in the marketplace, where people meet and exchange ideas. Luke identifies Epicurean and Stoic philosophers among those who debate with him. The names help locate the encounter in its real setting, but we do not need a survey of their philosophies to follow the argument Luke records.

Luke names the setting for Paul's address as the Areopagus; the CSB offers "Mars Hill" in its footnote. The passage makes the questioning clear without settling every detail of the proceedings. Avoid describing a formal criminal trial or reconstructing the listeners' exact arrangement. What Luke emphasises is their request to understand this unfamiliar teaching, and Paul's opportunity to proclaim the living God.

Acts tells how the risen Jesus extends His witness through His people. The move into Athens does not mean the gospel changes its centre to suit a new audience. Paul begins with questions and objects familiar to his hearers because he wants them to understand. He then challenges their account of God and calls for repentance. A thoughtful starting point can make truth understandable without making incompatible beliefs equally true. The difference is between communicating within a person's setting and surrendering what Scripture says.

The first lesson heard creation declaring God's glory. The second explained how Scripture leads us to salvation through Christ. Athens brings those truths together in witness. Paul speaks of the Creator whose gifts sustain everyone, and he announces something the marketplace cannot discover by admiring the sky: God has raised Jesus and appointed Him as Judge. A Christian worldview begins to shape the way we listen, reason and respond to another person.

The message is: **The Creator gives life to all and calls everyone to repent before the risen Judge, so we should weigh beliefs by his revelation and speak with truthful respect.** The first movement, verses 16–23, shows Paul attending to a real setting. The second, verses 24–29, explains why the Creator cannot be our dependent creation. The third, verses 30–34, brings dependence into accountability before the risen Judge. We learn both what Paul says and why his reasoning calls for a response.

Hear the argument from Creator to risen Judge

1. Paul listens and reasons in a real setting — verses 16–23

Paul's distress over the idols is important. He does not regard worship as harmless simply because it is sincere or culturally familiar. The living God deserves the worship people give elsewhere. Yet distress does not become permission for ridicule. Luke describes reasoning with people in more than one setting. Paul speaks about Jesus and the resurrection, hears questions and answers them. The text gives neither a model of silent approval nor an excuse for contemptuous argument.

At the Areopagus, Paul refers to what he has observed. His opening description of the Athenians as extremely religious recognises their evident concern with worship. The language can carry a critical edge, and the following argument certainly corrects them. We need not decide that the first sentence is either pure praise or an insult. Its clear function is to begin with a feature of their city that allows the conversation to move towards the God they do not know. Paul is deliberate rather than careless with his hearers.

The altar inscribed to an unknown god becomes a point of contact. Paul does not say that ignorance itself saves or that this altar already offers adequate knowledge of the true God. He announces the One they do not know. The word proclaim matters: Paul brings news that corrects the gap he identifies. He is not inviting his hearers to invent a god who best fits their preferences. Their admitted lack of knowledge opens a conversation whose answer must come from God's revelation.

A learner can practise the same care by stating a claim fairly before replying. If a fictional neighbour says people make gods to meet their needs, a fair restatement identifies that claim about human invention. It does not add that the neighbour hates everyone who believes in God. Learning to report what someone actually says is part of truthful speech. It also helps us recognise the real disagreement rather than winning an argument against something the person never meant.

The next movement answers the central question the setting raises. What kind of God does Paul proclaim? Without that answer, the class could leave with only a lesson about being polite. Paul gives substantive truth about the Creator, His independence and our dependence. Respectful communication serves that explanation. It cannot replace it.

2. God is Creator and Giver, not our dependent creation — verses 24–29

Paul begins with God making the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth. The claim rules out treating Him as one local deity competing for a share of the world. Everything already belongs to His created order. A shrine made by human hands cannot contain Him or establish His existence. Scripture elsewhere speaks of God's special presence among His people, but that does not mean the Creator depends upon a building to give Him a place in reality.

Notice the reversal in verse 25. A human-made object has to be formed, carried or maintained by people. Paul proclaims the God who gives the makers themselves their life and breath. He does not depend on the hands that would serve Him. Christian service therefore begins with gratitude for His gifts, rather than an attempt to keep Him supplied. Even the breath with which a listener argues against Paul is received from the Creator Paul announces. That gives this apparently abstract distinction an immediate, personal force.

Paul then joins all nationalities in a common human origin. God made every nationality from one man and governs their appointed times and places. The point excludes an account of humanity in which one group possesses a separate, higher kind of creaturely worth. It also places history under God's providence, His wise rule and care. Avoid turning the verse into a simplistic explanation of every modern border or injustice. God's sovereignty over history does not make every human decision just or remove our responsibility for wrongdoing.

The purpose named is that people might seek God. He is not far from each person. This does not mean everyone already enjoys saving fellowship with Him. The surrounding argument exposes ignorance and ends with repentance. Rather, human life is constantly dependent on the God whose gifts testify to His reality. His nearness as Creator should unsettle the thought that He is an optional subject at the edge of life. We live within His world, sustained by Him, whether we acknowledge Him or not.

Paul quotes cultural language about living in God and being His offspring. He uses what can truthfully acknowledge our dependence, then draws a conclusion against idols. He does not thereby approve every belief held by the poets or teach that humans share God's divine nature. In this context, offspring concerns creaturely origin and dependence. Adoption into God's family through Christ is a distinct saving blessing. Keeping those meanings apart helps you answer a learner who wonders whether everyone is already saved because everyone comes from God.

Verse 29 completes the reversal. If living people owe their existence to God, the divine nature cannot be adequately represented by lifeless material shaped through human skill and imagination. Gold, silver and stone do not become the source of life because people give them religious significance. The class diagram uses words and arrows to trace dependence; it deliberately does not picture God. Ask learners to notice the direction: the Creator gives life to humanity. Humanity does not produce or sustain the Creator.

This reasoning also exposes modern attempts to make a god answerable to personal preference. Someone may imagine a divine being who never judges anything they want, even without owning a carved image. Do not claim Paul named every modern example. Explain that the principle challenges our tendency to reverse the Creator-creature relationship. Since we depend on God, His truth judges our desires. That brings us to the command and promised judgement in the final movement.

3. The risen Judge calls for repentance — verses 30–34

God's overlooking of former ignorance should not be read as approval of idolatry or proof that sin never mattered. The contrast emphasises a decisive summons now announced: all people everywhere must repent. Repentance involves turning from false worship and rebellion towards the living God. It is more than adding one new religious idea to an existing collection. The universal language also includes the speaker and the class. We do not stand above the people whose beliefs we examine.

The reason is that God has appointed a day of righteous judgement through the man He has appointed. The address reaches Jesus, whom Paul has already been proclaiming. Judgement will be righteous, which means it will answer to God's truth and justice rather than favouritism or public popularity. Our accountability does not depend on whether we can avoid other people's notice. This is both sobering and a reason for hope that injustice will not have the final word.

The resurrection supplies God's public assurance concerning the appointed Judge. Paul is not using a general belief in life after death to make people feel secure. He points to God raising a particular man from the dead. Luke's earlier Gospel has described Jesus' bodily resurrection, and Acts repeatedly announces Him as the crucified and risen Lord. The reality of that event matters to the argument. The One whom people rejected is alive and has authority over them.

Luke records different responses. Some mock, some want to hear more and some join Paul and believe, including Dionysius and Damaris. The passage does not promise that a careful explanation will persuade everyone immediately. Nor does it invite us to declare a thoughtful question insincere. Faithful witness gives truth clearly and leaves the work of bringing people to faith to God. A classroom reply should therefore aim at understanding and honesty, not at embarrassing an opponent or guaranteeing a particular outcome.

Truthful respect begins with our shared dependence

God is independent, generous and sovereign. He creates and sustains rather than receiving His existence from our recognition. His gifts reach every human life, not only those who thank Him. His rule includes the course of nations, and His judgement will be righteous. These truths belong together. The Giver of breath has a rightful claim upon the lives He gives; accountability is not an intrusion by a stranger with no relation to us.

God also makes Himself known and calls sinners to turn. Paul can proclaim rather than speculate because the gospel concerns God's action in history. The resurrection confirms the authority of Jesus. The summons is serious, but it is not merely a threat without a way of reconciliation. In the wider witness of Luke and Acts, forgiveness is announced in the name of this same risen Jesus. Keep the call to repentance connected with the grace of the Saviour.

Human beings share dignity and dependence as God's creatures. Cultural difference does not erase common origin, accountability or the need for grace. We reason, worship and search, yet sin can turn these capacities towards false objects and distorted conclusions. Paul therefore treats his hearers as people capable of following an argument while refusing to treat their present beliefs as beyond correction. That combination is a useful pattern for speaking with young people too.

Learners may have questions they are unsure they are allowed to ask. Make room for an honest question without suggesting that uncertainty is wisdom in itself or that conviction is arrogance. Convictions should be examined by Scripture and supported by reasons. A hesitant explanation may show more care than a quick, combative answer. Help the class distinguish the content of an argument from the confidence of its speaker, and avoid assigning spiritual status on the basis of either.

The Creator-creature distinction reveals a need deeper than lack of information. We owe God worship and obedience, yet have turned His gifts towards our own rule. A righteous judgement therefore exposes our guilt. Paul's address ends with the risen Judge, and the gospel already proclaimed in Acts tells us how this Judge becomes the refuge of sinners. Jesus is the eternal Son who became truly human. He lived without sin and gave His life for those who had rebelled against God.

His death bears the judgement sinners deserve; His bodily resurrection declares His victory and living authority. Luke 24:46–47 joins the Messiah's suffering and resurrection with the proclamation of repentance for forgiveness to all nations. This is the saving context for the call Paul brings to Athens. Repentance and faith do not purchase forgiveness. They are the fitting turning towards the Saviour who gives it by grace. The Creator who needs nothing from us has acted generously to bring guilty people back to Himself.

This changes how we speak. We warn truthfully because judgement is real, and we speak patiently because we also need mercy. We cannot save a neighbour through winning a debate, but we can give an honest account of the Christ who saves. The class discussion ends with a clarified conclusion and textual reasons, not with declaring a classmate defeated. Invite learners to consider their own response to the Creator before making them advisers to everyone else.

The Creator-creature distinction means God and everything He has made are not on the same level of existence. He is the source; we are dependent. He does not become more real because we believe or less real because we deny Him. This guards against idolatry, whether a material image or a god shaped to protect our preferences. It also protects worship from becoming a bargain in which people supply something God needs in return for His help.

Providence names God's continuing care and rule over what He has made. Acts 17 joins creation with present life, breath, times and places. God did not simply begin a world and then withdraw. Yet His rule does not excuse human evil or make us able to explain every painful event. The passage gives grounds for dependence and accountability; it does not supply a complete explanation of suffering. Later lessons consider suffering and hope more directly. Acknowledge that scope if a question arises.

General revelation, God's witness through His works, makes human dependence and accountability real. Saving knowledge of Christ comes through the gospel God makes known. Paul does not tell the Athenians that their existing religious efforts are enough. He proclaims the God they do not know and calls them to repent before the risen Jesus. Teach both the reality of God's witness to everyone and the necessity of the good news without collapsing one into the other.

Questions worth thinking through

Does respect mean every belief is equally true?

Respect concerns how we treat a person made by God. Truth concerns whether a claim agrees with reality as God reveals it. Two contradictory claims cannot both be true in the same sense. We can recognise that disagreement without insulting a speaker. Ask what they mean, report their view fairly and give reasons for your response. Do not use the lesson as permission to label a whole religion or culture through one fictional sentence.

Does quoting a poet approve everything the poet believed?

No. Paul takes a statement that can express dependence on God and uses it within a different, corrective argument. He immediately rejects making God in material form. A quotation must be interpreted by the use he makes of it here. This is also a reminder to read carefully when someone quotes the Bible: familiar words do not prove that the conclusion respects their context.

Are all people God's children in the saving sense?

All owe their life to the Creator, which is the point of the offspring language here. Scripture also speaks of people becoming God's children through receiving Christ. Do not make creaturely origin equivalent to adoption or salvation. The universal call to repent shows that the address is not announcing that everyone's present relationship with God is already right.

Let this truth shape your own response

- When someone disagrees with me, do I listen well enough to state what they mean fairly?
- Where am I tempted to reshape God around what I want Him to approve?
- How does receiving every breath from Him challenge my pride or strengthen my gratitude?
- Can I explain why the risen Judge is also the Saviour to whom I invite people?
- What would patience and courage look like if a learner's response remains uncertain?

Thank God for life, breath and the gracious revelation of His Son. Confess any contempt or desire to win admiration. Ask for a clear mind, patient speech and courage to name the need for repentance. Pray for learners who are exploring difficult questions and those who have learned to hide them. Ask the Spirit to use the truth to bring faith in Christ, while keeping you faithful when responses differ.

Bring the passage into the room

This is lesson 3 in *A Christian Worldview: God's Truth for All of Life* and concludes *How God makes himself known*. Psalm 19 led from creation's witness to God's instruction and our need for cleansing. Second Timothy explained wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ. Now Paul proclaims the Creator and risen Judge in Athens, showing how these truths govern respectful witness. The next unit begins with God's creation of human life.

Choose before printing. Select one illustration and either activity A or its replacement B. Before the class in the Lesson gives the exact teacher pages, student copies, props and any cutting for each route. The lined notes page is optional and private. Read those directions and rehearse your chosen route; you do not need to prepare both alternatives.

The first illustration uses *Listening without surrendering the question*; the alternative is *A quotation with its meaning missing*. The Lesson gives the words, question, biblical connection and limits for each. Select the one that helps this group follow the passage. An illustration serves the explanation within the teaching, rather than creating another activity.

The reinforcement choices ask learners to explain their reasons: reasoned discussion or pool textual evidence. Use the main task or its replacement, leaving room for the complete memory verse, an understanding check and prayer. Read the classroom directions and prepare only the materials for the route you choose.

Ready to teach

Explain the three movements and show why dependence on the Creator leads to accountability before the risen Judge. Distinguish creaturely origin from saving adoption, and respectful listening from agreement with every claim. State how Christ's death and resurrection give guilty people hope. Rehearse a fair account of a discussion reason and a reply grounded in Acts 17. Return to the exposition if your answer becomes a generic instruction to be polite without proclaiming the living God.

Sources and further study

Read Acts 17:16–34, Luke 24:36–49 and John 1:1–18. Romans 3:21–26 explains justification through Christ, and Romans 1:18–25 gives a fuller account of human rejection of God's witness. The lesson compares one supplied claim; it makes no survey claims about contemporary religious communities.

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