

To an Unknown God

WHAT WE FOUND

- Paul was provoked by what he saw in Athens, and none of it showed up in what he said. He felt strongly and spoke carefully.
- He reasoned in the synagogue and spoke in the marketplace daily, and the first review he got was contempt: they called him a seed picker.
- He opened from something in their own city, an altar to an unknown god, which he had found by walking around and paying attention.
- He argued from creation, from human dependence, from the universal search, and from their own poets. He never quoted the Old Testament once.
- He quoted Aratus accurately. The other line, traditionally credited to Epimenides, is less securely attributed, and saying so is part of the discipline.
- He landed on repentance commanded of everyone, a fixed day of judgment, an appointed judge, and a bodily resurrection. The poets gave him a point of contact, not a discount.
- Three responses followed: mockery, deferral, and faith. Luke names two of the converts. A mixed result like that is common in Acts, and is not by itself a failure.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | St. Justin Martyr on the seeds of the Word

St. Justin Martyr, writing to defend Christians before a pagan public, teaches in substance that the Word who became flesh in Christ has scattered seeds of himself throughout the human race, so that whatever has been said well by anyone at all belongs by right to Christians.

This is the theological ground under Paul quoting Aratus. Justin does not treat pagan philosophy as equivalent to the fullness of revelation. He does go further than we might expect: at First Apology 46 he says that those who lived according to the Logos, naming Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, were in a qualified sense Christians. His claim is that truth wherever it is found has one owner.

St. Justin Martyr, summarized from his Second Apology, with the seeds-of-the-Logos material conventionally located at chapters 8, 10 and 13, and First Apology 46 for the Logos and the philosophers. A faithful summary of his teaching, not a quotation; the Second Apology chapter divisions are editorial and vary between editions.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | The Second Vatican Council on what the Church does not reject

The Council taught that the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions, and regards with sincere reverence those ways of acting and living, and those precepts and teachings, which often reflect a ray of the Truth that enlightens all people.

Read the next clause too, because it is the one that gets dropped: the Council says this while announcing without ceasing that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, in whom God has reconciled all things to himself. Paul does exactly this in one speech. He takes the altar seriously as a point of contact, and then tells them to repent.

Second Vatican Council, Nostra Aetate 2 (1965).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | St. John Paul II on the modern Areopagus

St. John Paul II took this scene as a working image for the Church's situation now, writing that the first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications, and naming others: the commitment to peace, the rights of the person, the development of peoples, culture, and scientific research.

His point is that an Areopagus is any place where a culture does its actual thinking, and that the Church has to go and stand in it rather than waiting for it to come to the parish hall. Ask where your own Areopagus is. Most of us work in one.

St. John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio 37 (1990).

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

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Rung 5 of the ladder. Find the altar. This week you go looking for what somebody already has.

- Keep praying for the three by name, daily.
- Ask one of the three what they actually believe about God, or about what happens when we die, or about what makes a life good. Ask as though you do not already know the answer, because you probably do not.
- Do not correct anything. Not one thing, not even gently.
- Afterward, write down one thing they said that is true, and that you could affirm honestly and without strategy. If you cannot find one, that is a finding too; bring it back.
- Optional, and worth it: spend twenty minutes with something they love. A show, a podcast, a book, a band. Paul knew their poetry.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

"That they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us."

Acts 17:27

BEFORE NEXT SESSION

Read John 9 before we meet, the whole chapter in one sitting. As you read, keep a running note of every time the man says he does not know something.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

- **CCC 27.** The desire for God is written in the human heart.
- **CCC 32.** From the order and beauty of the world one can come to knowledge of God as origin and end.
- **CCC 36.** God can be known with certainty from created things by the natural light of human reason.
- **CCC 28.** People have expressed their quest for God throughout history, in ways that are sometimes ambiguous.
- **CCC 843.** The Church recognizes in other religions a search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near.
- **CCC 856.** Missionary work requires respectful dialogue, and does not stop there.