

What was the Areopagus?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Areopagus.html>

Northwest of the city of Athens, Greece, is a small hill covered in stone seats. This area was once used as a forum for the rulers of Athens to hold trials, debate, and discuss important matters. This location was called Areopagus, a combination of the Greek words for “god of war” and “stone”: the Areopagus is literally “Ares’ Rock.” The equivalent to Ares in Roman mythology is Mars. By the time of Paul and the early Christian church, this location was under Roman control, so the spot was known as Mars Hill.

The older Greek term, Areopagus, was still used in Paul’s day, mostly in reference to the council that met there. When Paul gave his famous address on Mars Hill, one could say this occurred both “at” the Areopagus and “in front of” the Areopagus. For the most part, however, the term Areopagus as used in Acts chapter 17 refers to the group of Athenian leaders and thinkers who met on the hill.

The purpose of the Athenian Areopagus was similar to that of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Both were groups of respected local men charged with investigating spiritual or philosophical ideas. Both groups were composed of distinct sects holding contrary beliefs in certain areas. Both were considered “conservative” in the sense of mostly defending the status quo. Both were used somewhat like a court to settle disputes and judge certain cases. Unlike the Sanhedrin, however, the Athenian Areopagus was primarily interested in defending a Greek concept of “the gods.”

Paul was called to speak to the Areopagus when word of his teaching in Athens began to gain attention. While this council was involved in criminal trials, prosecution does not

seem to have been their purpose in speaking with Paul. Rather, Paul was invited to present information that the Athenians saw as “new” (Acts 17:21). Whether the entire council was there or not, Paul’s presence there was the result of interest, not hostility on their part. Paul used this opportunity before the Areopagus to deliver one of the New Testament’s most dynamic moments of evangelism. Speaking of an “Unknown God,” he tied the Athenians’ search for truth to the reality of the gospel.

As one would expect, not all of those in the Areopagus who heard Paul accepted his words. Some, in fact, found his teaching of the resurrection laughable (Acts 17:32). Yet some of those present, including a man named Dionysius, believed what Paul said (Acts 17:34). Just as some of the Jewish Sanhedrin had heard the truth and accepted it (Mark 15:43; John 19:38-39), some of the pagan Areopagus members believed after hearing the Word.