



## AN UNKNOWN GOD • Connecting with the Culture

### What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Acts 17:16-34

This passage is one of the most relevant in all of Acts. Here, Luke gives us a record of Paul's interaction with a group of philosophers in Athens. His tact and skill at communicating the gospel to this group of pluralists is fantastic. There is much here that we can model on campus.

In verse 16, Paul is waiting in Athens for his travel companions, Silas and Timothy. He was sent ahead alone because of the risk of violence from an unruly mob in the cities in which he had been. Although he is supposed to wait for them, Paul isn't one for inactivity. He sees that the city is full of idols, and is greatly distressed and moved to action. God alone is great. Mute idols of stone, gold, or silver ought not steal praise from God. So, Paul begins to preach, both in the synagogue and in the marketplace.

Some of the philosophers debate with him and invite him to come address the Areopagus, a society of philosophers. Luke, in this account, derides those philosophers for doing nothing but sitting around talking about the latest ideas. Their laziness may have been a character flaw, but it provided a great opportunity for Paul to preach the gospel.

In verse 22, Paul begins an extraordinary speech. The next nine verses are absolutely packed with wisdom about how to share the gospel in a critical and pluralistic setting. When teaching this section, give the group several minutes to read and observe what Paul does and says. Then, brainstorm together the principles that you can model on your campus. Below are several observations to get you started. There are undoubtedly more that you and your group may see.

- Verse 22: Paul commends the philosophers for the slightest good. Though they were idolaters, he begins by approving their religiousness. When persuading people, it is useful to start out with approbation, rather than accusation.
- Verse 23: Paul studied their culture. We, too, need to know the culture of the people we seek to reach. By what are they entertained? What are their political views? How do they view spirituality, morality, and philosophy?
- Verse 23: Because he studied the culture, Paul also found a launching point for the gospel within their circle of knowledge. What are the movies, sitcoms, beliefs or issues already in people's consciousness that can be a bridge to talking about Jesus?

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### What's the Big Idea?

In this passage, Paul shares the gospel with a group of pluralistic philosophers, whose worldview was very similar to that of college students today. His message is a study in how to tactfully, and effectively, create a thirst among unbelieving people to hear the gospel.

### What's the Problem?

In a pluralistic culture the gospel message may get no traction in the minds of unbelievers. We need to be careful to speak in terms that are acceptable and meaningful to our audience or we won't be heard and will have little influence.



- Verse 24: Though Paul commends their religiousness, he does not commend their idolatry, but immediately affirms that the real God is not an idol. He avoids the temptation to point out that their sinful behavior is wrong.
- Verses 24-26: Paul affirms the majesty and sovereignty of God. This is particularly important, given the lifeless rocks they were presently worshipping. God is superior to everything people seek to fill His place in their lives. Show them that He is better and can better meet their deepest longings!
- Verse 27: He observes that God is personal, and wants a relationship with us. Again, see the point above.
- Verse 28: Paul quotes their poets. He was well read and was able to make a point by drawing from sources with which they were likely to agree. Sometimes, a quote from “Friends” or “The Simpsons” may be more persuasive than anything we would have to say.
- Verses 29-30: He condemns idolatry in general, without pointing a finger specifically. He’s incredibly gracious, even as he critiques their behavior honestly.
- Verses 30-31: He calls them to repent, and warns them that a judgment is coming. He is not so concerned about being culturally relevant that he removes essential parts of the message.
- Though he is drawing on Biblical knowledge throughout, he never directly quotes the Bible. As it would not be perceived as authoritative, or even accurate, it was better not to source it. With a Jewish audience, he quoted the Bible constantly.
- Verse 32: Paul earns another hearing, where he can continue to tell them about Christ, probably in more complete terms.

There is so much here from which to learn. Our task is so crucial, that it is imperative we learn to be effective, not merely faithful. Connecting with the culture, as Paul did, can help us share the gospel of life in such a way that more will believe and be saved.

## What’s Our Response?

There are so many good application points to choose from in this passage.

Help the members of your group think through the next step in their personal attempts to reach out to people. There should be at least one principal from Paul’s methodology that can help them.

## What Are the Questions?

Acts 17:16-34

### LAUNCH

As our culture shifts toward a pluralistic, post-modern worldview some have observed with frustration that ministry is slower and harder than it used to be. How would you compare the difficulty of ministry today in our culture to ministry in the Roman Empire during the first century (which Acts records)?

### EXPLORE

1. Why was Paul waiting in Athens?
2. Why was he distressed to see the city full of idols?
3. What does he do about it?
4. Paul communicates in such a way that the people want to hear more. They invite him to speak the Areopagus, a society of philosophers. In verse 22, Paul begins an extraordinary speech to that group. The next nine verses are absolutely packed with wisdom about how to share the gospel in a critical and pluralistic setting. Take several minutes to read and observe some of the principles you see in Paul's communication of the gospel.
5. Athens, like the college campus, was a place of diverse ideas and philosophies. How does Paul adapt his message to be effective in this setting?
6. What are some of the points of common ground that Paul tries to establish with his audience?
7. How is he able to demonstrate that with all of their beliefs and ideas, that "deep down" they know they are still missing something?
8. The danger of accommodating the gospel to an audience is that, if you aren't careful, you can compromise on some of the truths of the gospel message, or avoid the more confrontational elements. Do you think Paul does this, or do you think he maintains a good balance?
9. What are some of the major ways this speech differs from other speeches found in Acts that were given to a primarily Jewish audience?
10. How did Paul gain this "inside" information about the audience to whom he was preaching?

### APPLY

11. Which of these ministry principles that we've gleaned from Paul can apply to your ministry on campus?
12. What are some specific ways you would explain the gospel differently to a person without any church or religious background?
13. Paul's speech earned him another hearing. What can you do to arouse people's thirst to know more about Jesus?
14. How did Paul's message arouse *your* thirst?

## What Are the Answers?

1. He was trying to avoid a violent mob that was following him on his missionary journey.
2. Paul was distressed because only God is worthy of worship. Mute idols ought not steal praise from God.
3. He preaches the gospel in the synagogues and in the marketplace.
4. See “What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?”
5. The picture he paints of God is a universal one. The God that Paul proclaims is not simply one more slice of the religious pie. It is the whole pie – the true God of which the Athenians only have a small slice of understanding.
6. He notes that they are religious, and that they, too, worship. He quotes from common poets and uses ideas and concepts that they would be familiar with.
7. In pointing to their altar given to worship of “an unknown God,” he is alluding to the fact that with all of their religion, they instinctively know that something is still missing in their spiritual experience.
8. Allow the group to discuss.
9. It doesn’t contain the many Scripture references employed in sermons to the Jews. Paul knew that, unlike the Jews, the Greeks would not have taken the Scripture to be authoritative.
10. Most likely, in the course of actually spending time with lost people, reading their books, listening to what they talk about. The text says that he had been in the marketplace, day by day, sharing with those “who happened to be there.”
11. Having studied Paul’s adaptation of the gospel to his audience, the application is for the group to think through how they can apply similar principals in their ministry.
12. Allow the group to discuss. Among other things, the authority of the Scriptures cannot be taken for granted.
13. Allow the group to discuss.
14. Are there things he said that reminded you of your need for a Savior?

## Memorize

...I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

I Corinthians 9:22