

Witnesses to Jesus:

Witness to the Unknown God: Paul in Athens

Acts 17:16-34

Background:

“The world’s major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, are making inroads as are a variety of cults, New Age philosophies, occult activities and even traditional paganism. How do we cope with a world that knows or cares so little about the truth of Jesus Christ? Paul left us a helpful model when he visited the world center of pagan philosophy and religion—Athens” (The NIV Quiet Time Bible, [IVP](#)[®]). What are some of the “idols” people worship on your campus? What is so attractive about these idols?

1. Read Acts 17:16–34. What upset Paul about Athens, and what did he do about it [verses 16–17]?
2. Describe the Athenians’ reaction to the gospel message in verses 18–21. What are some things that might have caused this response? [Note: Epicureanism was a school of Greek philosophy that emphasized the remoteness of uncaring gods, a world governed by blind chance, the absence of an afterlife and the pursuit of pleasure. Stoicism emphasized a world determined by fate, where human beings must pursue their duty, “resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own self-sufficiency” (John Stott). The Areopagus was a hill overlooking Athens that served as the chief courtroom of the day; it was also a place to hold philosophical discussions.]
3. What strategies does Paul employ when he begins his address at the Areopagus in verses 22–23?
4. What does Paul emphasize as he describes the “unknown god” in verses 24–28? Why might he stress these particular things to this group of listeners?
5. Note how Paul quotes from Greek philosophy and poetry in verse 28. Why do you think he does this? What implications does this have for us as we share Christ on campus?
6. In verses 29–31, what else does Paul say about God? How does he introduce the concept of Jesus? What does he emphasize about Jesus? If you had time or opportunity to say just one or two things about Jesus, what would you emphasize?
7. In verses 29–31, what kind of response does Paul think the Athenians should have to his message, and why? What kind of response do they give him in verses 32–34? How are these responses like those you get as you share the gospel?
8. Paul uses the altar with the “unknown god” inscription as a “launch pad” to share God’s truth. What starting points do you have with those around you? How could you use these more effectively?
9. Paul shares the gospel with the Athenians in a way that is relevant, sensitive and uncompromising to the truth. In what ways might you be tempted to water down God’s message to groups of people you share with? In what ways are you tempted to be too harsh? How can you avoid either extreme?

In Closing:

How are you involved in the lives of non-Christians around you? If you're not, what specific steps can you take? How can you become better equipped to effectively communicate the gospel with these people in a way they can understand?