

MAIN POINT

When we engage with our culture enough to understand its hopes, dreams and idols, we will be able to offer the hope of Christ in a way that people will actually hear as “good news.”

INTRODUCTION

In groups of three to five, discuss: What sets you apart from everyone else in the world? What is unique about you? Tell about a unique talent or ability of yours, or a one-of-a-kind item you own, or an unusual experience you have had.

Ask two or three people who came to faith in Christ as adults: Before you became a Christian, what are some of the things you formerly believed regarding Jesus and God?

When Paul traveled to Athens, he paid close attention to their objects of worship and engaged with their cultural thought leaders. In this way, he was able to express the gospel in ways that answered the questions they were asking. Similarly, when we engage with our culture enough to understand its hopes, dreams and idols, we will be able to offer the hope of Christ in a way that people will actually hear as “good news.”

UNDERSTANDING

> READ ACTS 17:16-18.

As Paul waited in Athens for his companions, he took every opportunity, both in the synagogue and in the marketplace, to talk about Jesus with anyone who would listen. His message caught the attention of the Athenian philosophers.

Paul’s spirit was deeply troubled by the city’s widespread idolatry. Why did this bother him?

What is there about our culture today that provokes or troubles your spirit? How can we turn anger or frustration at the world’s indifference toward God into motivation for our own evangelistic efforts?

Paul’s teaching quickly got the attention of two major philosophical groups in Athens. To the Epicureans, existence was material and the goal was intellectual pleasure. The Stoics valued universal reason and self-sufficiency. Neither group believed in resurrection or life after death. They dismissed Paul as a “pseudo-intellectual” because they perceived his teaching to be unsophisticated.

What is unique about Jesus, compared to the religions of the world? How did Paul bring this out in verse 18?

Why are our claims about the uniqueness of Jesus so unpopular in the marketplace of our culture?

Do you think insisting on the uniqueness of Jesus brings people closer to God or drives them away? Why? What does this say about the best way to reach people for Christ?

Christianity is unique among the world's religions. In part that uniqueness lies in who God is not: He is not an idol or one of many gods. Neither is He some philosophical idea. God is alive; He alone is God, and He is Truth. In Paul's example we see the need to refute false ideas about God in our quest to help people understand the truth. This is not "intolerant" or "closed-minded"; rather, truth cannot coexist with falsehood. To claim otherwise is false.

What strategies and tactics of witnessing can we use in the different settings of our modern world? Where are our "synagogues"? Where are our "marketplaces"?

How can our interactions today with those who do not know Jesus earn us invitations to speak the truth?

> READ ACTS 17:19-29.

The Areopagus, also known as Mars' Hill, was a forum in Athens for debate and discussion. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, realizing that Paul brought a new teaching, asked him to address the assembly there.

What does Paul reveal about God in this passage? What did Paul say everyone on earth can know about God, in Romans 1:19-20? How does this relate to his message in Acts 17?

What evidences do you see in our culture that people today are interested in learning about God?

What are the idols of our modern society that people worship in place of God? How can we use those idols as springboards to introduce them to the good news of the gospel?

What false ideas about God or Jesus are prevalent today among nonbelievers?

Christianity's uniqueness in part lies in who God is. We didn't make Him. He made us. He is Creator of all, Spirit, Father, Lord over everything, without need of anything from us; yet He is involved in our lives. Such a great God deserves our worship. As we explain the truths about God to those who do not know or believe, we must be respectful to them and yet firm with the truth. One cannot have a saving relationship with the Father unless they truly know who He is. Opportunities to speak to unbelievers about Jesus are all around us. We can grow in our ability to engage people where they are in their spiritual understanding.

Our message should give them the information they need to hear about God's love for them, and the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

> **READ ACTS 17:30-34.**

Paul wrapped up his message by giving notice of the coming judgment by Jesus, and God's proof through the testimony of the resurrection. His audience, while perhaps not agreeing with these statements, could not deny their uniqueness in the world of religious thought. Our "audiences" today must also hear these two vital truths, resurrection and judgment, from believers.

Based on Paul's words before the Areopagus, what do you think he was telling the Athenians to repent from? Why?

Why must Christ's resurrection be a part of any gospel message?

Christianity is unique because of God's gracious act of salvation demonstrated through Jesus' death and resurrection. Christ alone offers salvation from the final judgment. Jesus must be our message, because He is the only source of hope for those to whom we witness today. No other scheme or philosophy can take His place.

APPLICATION

How does our culture challenge Christianity's uniqueness? How do you emphasize Christianity's uniqueness in your "marketplace?"

Paul used idols and Greek poetry as points of contact with the people in Athens. What are some more specific connections you can make with friends or family who need to hear the gospel?

What would it take for the words "as usual" (v. 2) to describe the way you naturally seek to introduce Jesus to everyone you meet?

As a group, what can we do to pray for and reach out to people in our community and around the world who don't know Christ?

PRAY

Pray that God would give us boldness in sharing our faith with others. Ask that all would willingly allow God to stretch and strengthen us to be better used by Him.

FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

1. Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:

Who in your world is giving evidence of an interest in God or spiritual things? What will you say to this person to identify yourself as a Christ-follower who has found truth?

Are you personally facing the day of judgment with confidence, knowing that Jesus Christ has paid for your sins? How can you assure yourself of this? Who can you tell?

What can you do to emphasize the message of Jesus' resurrection and the coming judgment as you share His story with your friends and neighbors?

How will you demonstrate your gratitude to God for your salvation by your life and actions through the coming week?

2. The challenge to memorize Acts 17:24-25.

COMMENTARY

ACTS 17:1-34

17:1-4. Paul and his fellow missionaries traveled to Thessalonica, 100 miles southwest of Philippi. Thessalonica was the capital and largest city of Macedonia. It had a Jewish community, and Paul followed his usual pattern of beginning his witness in the synagogue. After preaching there on three successive Sabbaths, opposition developed; and Paul had to abandon his synagogue witness. Many believed, however, including Jews and "God-fearing" Greeks.

17:5-9. Eventually Jewish opponents stirred up a riot against Paul and Silas, and they left the town. The missionaries went to Berea, 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica. Paul found the synagogue there more receptive to his teaching and led the people in serious Bible study. Jews eventually came from Thessalonica and incited crowds in Berea against Paul.

17:10-15. Paul fled to Athens in the southern Greek province of Achaia. Paul did not stay long in Athens. It was a stopping place where he awaited the arrival of his coworkers, Timothy and Silas.

17:16-18. In Athens Paul encountered all sorts of people from many religious backgrounds. Athens was the intellectual center of the Roman empire. It was filled with teachers and students of every persuasion. Two representative groups were the Stoics and Epicureans (17:18). These were leading philosophies of the day. Both had schools in Athens.

17:19-21. The philosophers led Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus. The Greek word Areopagus means Hill of Ares. Ares was the Greek god of war; Mars was the Roman god of war. Thus, sometimes the site is referred

to as “Mars Hill.” The term was used to designate both a hill and a court that met there from ancient times. The court was responsible for dealing with such matters as the introduction of new religions into the city.

17:22. Paul began by seeking to win the good will of his audience. He referred to their being very religious. He used an ambiguous word that could mean religious or superstitious. His hearers probably understood the remark as a positive compliment for their piety. Paul’s disdain of their idolatry would indicate that he saw their religiosity negatively, as an empty superstition.

17:23. Several ancient writers referred to such altars dedicated to unknown gods. Most sculptures were dedicated to particular gods and goddesses. Those dedicated to UNKNOWN gods probably were furnished in case some god might have felt neglected and taken out his wrath on the people. The idol Paul referred to was thus a particularly blatant example of the religiosity of the Athenians. They had room for all the gods, known or unknown. Paul seized his opportunity to introduce them to the one true God. He proclaimed to them the God they did not know and who was the only One that counts, the only One that exists. In speaking of their ignorance of this God, Paul was striking at the very self-identity of the philosophers.

17:24-25. Paul first presented God as Creator. Stoics were pantheistic. They did not believe in a divine Creator. Instead, they believed that creation itself was divine. For them divinity was to be found in creation, not over it. Paul concluded that because God is Creator of all, He is the Lord of heaven and earth—above His creation—and thus does not live in temples built by people and with materials He created (see also Acts 7:48-50). He drew a further conclusion that the Creator of all that exists needs nothing from His creation such as idols or any other external form of human piety. The Athenian philosophers probably agreed with that idea. They believed that divinity is complete in itself and needs nothing. However, they and Paul did not understand divine all-sufficiency in the same way. They believed that humans shared in the divine, that everyone has a divine spark within them. Paul understood that humans are in no sense divine.

17:26-28. Paul’s first teaching focused on God’s distance from us; the second emphasized His nearness. From one man, Adam, God made all nations. The wording could mean national boundaries or the habitable areas of the earth. The Greek philosophers could resonate with Paul’s words. Indeed Paul quoted two of the Stoic poets in 17:28: Epimenides (around 600 B.C.) and Aratus (who lived around 315-240 B.C.). The Stoics took the poet’s words we are his offspring to mean that all humans are divine. Paul understood that we are God’s children, not in the sense of sharing divinity but in the sense of being His creation.

17:30. The Athenians’ idolatry was a sign of their sinfulness, worshiping the world rather than God. Paul proceeded to the next step: he called on his hearers to repent, to turn from their sins to God. God had overlooked their sins of ignorance in the sense that He had not brought to them the judgment they deserved. He had instead sent the gospel to them. God now commanded them to repent.

17:31. The final step is judgment. If we fail to repent in light of the gospel, only judgment remains for us. God has set a day for judgment. That day is associated with the return of the man God had raised from the dead. He will return as Judge of the entire world. Paul did a lot of bridge-building. He presented biblical truths in a way the philosophers would understand. He even quoted their poets. However, He never compromised the gospel. He declared the central truths of the resurrection and judgment, though he probably was aware that this would cost him most of his audience.

17:32-34. Paul’s address was cut short by mockers who found the idea of Jesus’ resurrection to be foolish. (See 1 Cor. 1:23-24.) A second group were unconvinced, but still open. They wanted to hear more. The third group believed. It was not a large group. Two believers are mentioned: Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus; the other was a woman named Damaris. A number of others also believed.