

MAIN POINT

Throughout our “Living Sent” series, we have seen that every Christian is a missionary. Whether at home, work, school, or around the world, God has called every believer to live on mission with Him. If we are to reach our world today, we must be willing to meet people where they are and yet not compromise the truth of the gospel. Paul modeled this effective approach to missions in Acts 17, when he addressed the Athenians’ misguided spiritual views in a way that made sense to their culture.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

Did you or someone you know convert to Christianity from another religion? Describe that experience and who influenced you. If not, how did you first encounter Christ?

Other than Christianity, what religions or spiritual belief systems are prevalent in Jacksonville? What circumstances do you think cause people to seek spiritual answers in life? What does that reveal to you about humanity?

What makes Christianity unique from these other belief systems? Why is insisting on Christianity’s uniqueness unpopular in our society?

Witnessing to people who believe in religions other than Christianity is nothing new for Christians. In Acts 17, Paul shared the truths of Christianity to an audience that predominately worshiped idols. As we encounter people who do not know God, we must be able and willing to act in faith and share His message of salvation with them.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 17:16-21.

Why was Paul’s heart disturbed by the cultural climate of Athens (v. 16)?

Are the different religions practiced in our society similar to or different from that which Paul encountered in Athens? Explain.

Athens was the intellectual center of the Roman empire, but the situation there disturbed Paul. He encountered all sorts of people from many religious backgrounds and was deeply agitated at the city's widespread idolatry. More than 30,000 statues were erected to gods. Luke wrote that Paul's "spirit was troubled," which denotes fury and sadness, a deep grief over the idolatry. The pagan idol worship offended his moral conscience.

Verse 17 says Paul met with people in both the synagogue and the marketplace. Why might he have gone to both places to share the gospel? What are the different perspectives of the people in those two places?

What is the benefit of meeting people where they are for the sake of evangelism?

Much of Paul's ministry was to Jews in the synagogues, teaching them about the Messiah, and he continued that practice in Athens. But he extended his ministry to the marketplace because it was the center of Athenian social and economic life. It was there that Paul dialogued with Athenian philosophers (v. 18). Paul took the time to get to know the city and the people.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ACTS 17:22-32.

The philosophers in Athens, curious about this new religion, led Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus. The Athenians were religious but needed to be introduced to authentic religion. Paul used their altar "to an unknown God" as a springboard for his message about the one true God.

Why do you think Paul began his address to the Areopagus with a compliment? How might we sincerely compliment a non-Christian as an approach to wise witnessing?

Why can God not be represented by an image?

What truths did Paul communicate about the character of God (vv. 24-31)? Which of Paul's descriptions of God is most important? Why?

What pattern did Paul set for us as we share the gospel?

Paul began with the people's needs, pointing out their idol to an unknown God (v. 23). He then introduced them to that God through some of His chief characteristics (vv. 24-29). Next, he emphasized their need to move from ignorance to repentance and belief in God because the day of judgment is coming (v. 30). He closed by pointing them to Jesus as the only way to salvation (v. 31).

Read verse 32 again. How was Paul's message received?

Paul made the gospel understandable for his listeners. When he called for commitment, some believed and others found an opportunity to ridicule Paul and reject God. As we live sent in our world, it's important to remember that God doesn't hold us responsible for people's responses. God just expects us to be faithful by sharing the message of Christ and trusting the Holy Spirit to work through us. We'll talk more about this next week.

NEXT STEPS

Leave your group with these parting thoughts, designed to put action to the truths learned and re-emphasize the principles from your meeting time.

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

When are some times people are most curious about issues of faith today? How does the gospel speak to those seasons of life?

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 this week?

PRAY

Close by praying over your group. Pray that group members will take advantage of opportunities to witness to the people God places in their lives. Pray also that the people in your group will prayerfully consider how they will give of their time and resources in support of those who are dedicating their lives to taking the gospel to people who haven't heard it.

FOLLOW UP

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

- ☐ Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - **Do you find it easier to discuss spiritual things with people you know or with strangers? Why do you think this is?**
 - **What are some specific points of connection you can make with friends or family who need to hear the gospel?**
- ☐ The challenge to memorize Acts 17:24-25 and 2 Corinthians 5:14.
- ☐ A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.

CHETS CREEK CHURCH

LIVING SENT

RELEVANT (ACTS 17:16-32)

PAUL IN ATHENS (ACTS 17:16-32)

17:16-18 In Athens Paul encountered all sorts of people from many religious backgrounds. Athens was the intellectual center of the Roman empire. Two representative groups were the Stoics and Epicureans (17:18). These were leading philosophies of the day. Paul was especially upset by the many idols that he observed throughout the city. In many ways Athens was the idol capital of the world. Paul preached in the synagogue on Sabbaths and on weekdays to whoever passed by in the marketplace. The Greek philosophers were curious about the new message Paul was preaching.

17:19-22 The philosophers led Paul to a meeting of the Areopagus. The Greek word **Areopagus** means Hill of Ares. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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 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.