

Road Trip (7): Paul's Journeys in Acts

From Athens to the Unknown God – Reaching the Culture

Acts 20:24; Acts 17:16–34

Introduction: Have you ever been a tourist in a new city and been awed by the sights? Paul found himself in such a place on his “road trip” through the ancient world. As Paul walked the streets of Athens, he saw grand temples on every corner and altars to every deity imaginable – even an altar “To the Unknown God.” His heart broke for this city so full of false gods and spiritual emptiness.

I. A provoked heart in a city of idols: (Acts 17:16–17)

A. Paul arrives alone in Athens—he is “greatly distressed” or “provoked in spirit” seeing the city filled with idols.

B. He acts out of holy concern: he reasons with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the synagogue and with everyday people in the marketplace.

Idolatry is anything we love, trust, or serve more than God (wealth, pleasure, self).

James Boice: “The reason men and women do not know God is they do not want to know him.”

II. Building a bridge to the lost: (Acts 17:17–23)

A. Paul's approach uses respectful dialogue, not condemnation—Greek “dialegomai” (reasoned).

B. He listens, affirms the Athenians' spiritual search, and finds common ground.

C. He's invited to speak at the Areopagus (Mars Hill). *His opening: “People of Athens, I see you are very religious” (v.22).*

1. He uses their altar “To the Unknown God” as a redemptive analogy—a starting point to introduce the true God.

Ray Pritchard & John Maxwell stress respect and building relational bridges.

2. Paul tailored his message, addressing philosophers (Epicureans and Stoics) and referencing cultural language (v.28).

D. Lessons we can learn from Paul's approach

- Start where people are.
- Speak with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).
- Truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).
- “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You” (Augustine).

III. Presenting the unknown God: (Acts 17:24–31)

A. Paul's revelation about God:

1. Creator: God made the world and does not live in temples (v.24)

Adrian Rogers: “You cannot have a creation without a Creator.”

2. **Sustainer:** God gives everyone life and breath, needing nothing (v.25)
John Piper: The gospel is “help available,” not “help wanted.”
3. **Ruler and Nearness:** God made all nations and sets their times/places so people might seek Him—He's not far from us (vv.26–27)
 - a. *Adrian Rogers:* God is active in the affairs of the world.
 - b. Paul quotes Greek poets: “In him we live and move and have our being” (v.28)
4. **Judge:** God now commands everyone to repent, for He's set a day when He'll judge the world by Christ, confirmed by the resurrection (vv.30–31)
 - a. Supporting: 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Romans 10:9
 - b. The Thessalonians “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

When you share your faith, include core gospel truths—sin, repentance, Jesus' lordship, the cross, and resurrection.

IV. Mixed reactions – and our call to faithful witness (Acts 17:32–34)

A. Rejection: Some sneered at the resurrection. (expect it)

B. Procrastination: Some wanted to hear more (delayed decision). *But tomorrow is not promised* (2 Cor. 6:2 – “Now is the day of salvation.”)

C. Reception: Some believed (Dionysius, Damaris, others)—a small but real harvest. And a church was born in Athens.

Charles Stanley: “Obey God and leave the consequences to Him.”

(Lk 15:7 – Joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Not all will respond, but even one changed life is worth it.

Conclusion & next step: Our model for reaching the lost is Paul:

- A provoked heart
- Respectful bridge-building
- Clear gospel declaration
- Trust in God for results

Steps for us, pray for boldness to move from “sightseeing” to soul-winning in our own Athens.

For seekers: The “unknown God” can be known—repent and trust Jesus!

For believers: Recognize your mission field. Even one conversation can plant an eternal seed.