

Athenian and American Idols

by Randall Schlabach

FAITH STORY

Acts 17:16-34

SESSION FOCUS

In this scripture, Paul is in Athens, and as he walks through the city, he notices that there are lots of idols in the city. He finds one with an inscription to the “unknown god”. Paul decides to go talk wherever he can about this unknown god which he says is the “God who made the world and everything in it.” He starts in the synagogue and argues with the Jews and devout persons. He also goes to the market place and argues with anyone who will listen and talk to him. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debate him, and because people want to know more, Paul ends up in front of the Areopagus—a type of court to decide on educational policies. While there, he uses their idols to talk about God.

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION

- Camera
- Contact a person (student or adult) prior to class and have them become familiar with Paul’s speech in Acts, 17:22-31. Ask them to paraphrase it and put it in their own words to share with the class during the drama. This “Paul” will also need to prepare the arguments that he presents to the people in Athens—sharing the Gospel with people who are worshipping idols. (See “Insights” in Explore the Bible)
- Note cards and pens—one for each person.
- Bibles

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS

Ask the students to share any highlights or downers about their week. After they have done this, ask: What took the most of your time and energy this week? If you had to name one thing that was the main focus of your week, what would it be?

Ask students to each form a statue that’s in a pose symbolizing a main emphasis of the week. (a sport, studying, drama, singing, watching TV, on the computer, etc.)

When everyone is ready, have all of the statues “freeze.” Take pictures.

CONNECT

Ask: *Do you think that what you are representing in your statue is, in any way, an “idol” in your life? If yes, freeze in that position. If no, relax.*

Talk briefly about what you see in the statues and invite students to comment as well.

Transition statement: *Our story today is about Paul, who noticed a lot of statues and idols when he was walking around Athens. One of them had an interesting inscription.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Hand out Bibles and ask students to turn to Acts 17:16-34.

Assign parts to students:

- Paul—already chosen prior to class
- Jews and devout persons
- People in marketplace
- Philosophers

Talk with the students about how to act out this passage. The different people in Athens will need to decide how they will argue with Paul about the idols that they worship.

Insights to use in the drama:

The Stoics believed “god” was in everything and so everything was “god,” while the Epicureans had little or no belief in “god”. Paul pointed out the idol with the inscription “To an unknown god,” and explained that the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. Paul uses the fact that they have the idol to the “unknown god” to say that God is not unknown, and that they are not to think of God as gold or silver or stone. God gives all people life and breath and everything in it. God did all these things so that all would seek God, and reach out and find God.

APPLY

Divide the class into half. One half will resume their “statue” positions that they shared earlier, while the other half of the class will be “Paul’s.” The Paul’s will stroll among the statues and talk to them about the activities they are displaying. Imagine what Paul would say to them. Are they, or are they not, idols?

Switch roles. The Paul’s portray their statues and the statues become Paul’s and do the same critique—are they idols or not?

Discuss:

- How do we know when the important things in our lives become idols?
- Are there ways to use these “life priorities” to share God with others? What are some examples?

RESPOND

Hand out note cards and ask the students to write down a “modern day idol” they would like to use to witness to someone. Invite students to pray for each other as they share God’s Good News with others.

FOLLOW-UP

Print the pictures you took and post them in your room.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE

Athens was the cultural center of the Greco-Roman world. Its art, architecture, philosophy, and scientific studies were well-known. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were the two most influential schools of Greek thought at the time. Epicureans thought pleasure and happiness were the most important things. They defined pleasure as the absence of pain and the ordinary anxieties of life. When Paul debated them, he used their language, yet his message of divine judgment and resurrection were contrary to their beliefs.

Stoicism is the thought that there is a great purpose shaping all nature and people toward good ends. As people conform to this purpose, they fulfill their destiny. The most important thing is the goodness for its own sake. Paul contrasts this by saying that we are not supposed to be in tune just with nature and all things—we are to be in tune with God, because God is the creator of these things.

The Areopagus was the place for the supreme judicial and legislative bodies. They were stripped of this power yet continued to control religion and education, so their encounter with Paul was not a trial but more of an open hearing so that this group in charge of public lecturers could scrutinize this new teaching.

WORKS CONSULTED

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