

What follows are the notes I used when teaching this topic.

# Target Evangelism

An Evangelistic Exposition of Acts 17:16-34

By Frank DeCenso

## Introductory Questions:

- How prepared are we to witness at a Rescue Mission?
  - How prepared are we to witness at Harvard to a room of Philosophy professors?
  - How prepared are we to witness at a New Age convention?
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## What is Target Evangelism?

It consists of two dynamic parts.

- **Target Preparation**
    - Simple preparation – The Gospel is simple and since we are saved, we have partaken of the Gospel. Understanding the simple Gospel, and thus, being able to share it as such is crucial.
    - Thorough preparation – depends on the target audience.
      - Who is the Target?
      - What does the Target believe?
      - Why do they believe what they do?
        - History
        - Family
        - Locale
  - **Target Presentation**
    - Gospel never changes – core of the Gospel always the same.
    - Gospel presentations can change depending on target audience.
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Setting the stage for our text in Acts; AD 50-52 Paul in Athens.

Paul was almost beat to death in Lystra

Acts 14:19

Paul was imprisoned and beat in Philippi

Acts 16:22-24

Paul was chased out of Thessalonica and Berea

Acts 17:10; Acts 17:1

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**Vs 16** “*While Paul waited for them in Athens*”

Paul was taken to Athens because of persecution ...

Acts 17:12-15 (NIV) Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. [13] When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. [14] The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. [15] The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

One of Luke’s major themes in Acts is persecution leads to proclamation.

Acts 8:3-4; 11:19-21; 13:50-14:3

“*Was greatly distressed*”

G3947 δᾶνῆϊνύτῦ, paroxunoō

**Thayer Definition:**

1) to make sharp, sharpen

1a) to stimulate, spur on, urge

1b) to irritate, provoke, arouse to anger

1b1) to scorn, despise  
1b2) provoke, make angry  
1b3) to exasperate, to burn with anger

**Part of Speech:** verb

**A Related Word by Thayer's/Strong's Number:** from G3844 and a derivative of G3691

**Citing in TDNT:** 5:857, 791

**Total KJV Occurrences:** 2

**provoked, 1**

1 Cor 13:5

**stirred, 1**

Acts 17:16

Also in Septuagint:

Deut. 1:34 (NIV)

<sup>34</sup>When the LORD heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore:

Deut. 9:18-19 (NIV)

Then once again I fell prostrate before the LORD for forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the LORD'S sight and so provoking him to anger. [19]I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the LORD listened to me.

Why was Paul "provoked to anger" ?

*"the city was full of idols"*

Pausanias says that Athens had more images than all the rest of Greece put together. Pliny states that in the time of Nero Athens had over 30,000 public statues besides countless private ones in the homes. Petronius sneers that it was easier to find a god than a man in Athens. Every gateway or porch had its protecting god. They lined the street from the Piraeus and caught the eye at every place of prominence on wall or in the agora.

**AT Robertson, Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament**

The city wholly given to idolatry—Lucian (t. i. Prometh. p. 180) says of the city of Athens, "On every side there are altars, victims, temples, and festivals." Livy (45, 27) says that Athens "was full of the images of gods and men, adorned with every variety of material, and with all the skill of art."  
"Barnes Notes on the New Testament"

Chased out of numerous cities, beat and imprisoned, alone in idolatrous Athens, provoked to anger.  
Still – Paul was prepared for Target Evangelism.

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**Vs 17** "*so he reasoned in the synagogue*"

G1256 äéäéŸññáé, dialegomai

**Thayer Definition:**

1) to think different things with one's self, mingle thought with thought

1a) to ponder, revolve in mind

2) to converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss

**Part of Speech:** verb

**A Related Word by Thayer's/Strong's Number:** middle voice from G1223 and G3004

**Citing in TDNT:** 2:93, 155

**Total KJV Occurrences:** 13

**reasoned, 4**

Acts 17:2, Acts 18:4, Acts 18:19, Acts 24:25

**disputed, 3**

Mark 9:34, Acts 17:17,

**Jude 1:9** (NIV)

But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"

**disputing, 3**

Acts 19:8-9 (2), Acts 24:12

**preached, 1**

Acts 20:7

**preaching, 1**

Acts 20:9

**speaketh, 1**

Heb 12:5

Athens was not just a hotbed of idolatry; it was an immense demonic stronghold.

One part of preparation for preaching the Gospel MAY INCLUDE the destruction of arguments.

2 Cor. 10:5 (NIV) We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Paul was an evangelist and he coupled that with a vigorous defense of the faith.

Acts 9:20-22; 9:28-29; 17:2-3; 18:4; 18:19; 19:8

Apologetics not for the sake of debate, but rather for the sake of evangelism!

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As was his custom he went to the synagogue first.

Paul consistently targeted these groups in his ministry.

“God-fearing Greeks”

“one that feared God” (*phoboumenos ton theon*) Luke describes “a God-fearing proselyte” as in 10:22, 35. This is his usual term for the Gentile seekers after God (13:16, 26; 17:4, 17, etc.), who had come into the worship of the synagogue without circumcision, and were not strictly proselytes, though some call such men “proselytes of the gate” (cf. Acts 13:43); but clearly Cornelius and his family were still regarded as outside the pale of Judaism (10:28, 34; 11:1, 8; 15:7). They had seats in the synagogue, but were not Jews.

“Robertson’s Word Pictures in the Greek New Testament”

“as well as in the marketplace”

“Mediterranean cities were built around a marketplace (Gr. Agora, Lat. Forum). In those cities influenced by Hellenistic town-planning the marketplace was a large open area, rectangular in shape, given over to public monuments and statues. It was surrounded by a covered porch (stoa), which had steps and offices behind.”

**E. Ferguson, “Backgrounds of Early Christianity”**

It was in the Agora that “Paul, conforming easily to Athenian tradition as old as Socrates, met the inquisitive quick-tongued populace, joined in the animated discussion which was the habit and manner of their market-place.”

**E.M. Blaiklock, “Compact Handbook of New Testament Life”**

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**Vs 18** “*group of Epicurean and Stoic Philosophers*”

Paul was prepared beforehand with information on potential targets.

When we get to the speech, we’ll see Paul directed his speech’s contents to those targets, while still retaining and explaining the Gospel message.

Paul perhaps familiar with Stoicism because a second head of the Stoic school in 204BC came from Tarsus.

“*began to dispute with him*”

They picked him out of the marketplace where other would-be philosophers were expounding their stuff.

Unbelievable demonic powers probably prevalent in Athens.

Darkness always responds to light.

Paul was prepared for this onslaught, and expecting it he was ready to use it as an opportunity to evangelize.

Using the response of darkness to preach the Gospel to those under the influence of darkness – must be prepared because responses will vary.

Some may attack, some may ask for more information.

Thorough Target Preparation will take this into consideration.

“*what is this babbling trying to say*”?

**BABBLER** A derogatory term the Epicureans and Stoics used against Paul in Athens (Acts 17:18). The Greek word literally means “seed picker” and was used of birds (especially crows) who lived by picking up seeds. It was applied to people who lived parasitically by picking up pieces of food off the merchants’ carts. In the field of literature and philosophy the term was applied to those who plagiarize without the ability to understand or properly use what they had taken. The philosophers referred to Paul as a babbler because they considered Paul an ignorant plagiarist. Another Greek word *bebelos* refers to something outside the religious sphere. It appears in 1 Timothy 4:7; 6:20; 2 Timothy 2:16; Hebrews 12:16, usually in reference to chatter or babbling talk about worldly things, an activity Christians should avoid. In Hebrews it refers to a godless person.

**“Holman Bible Dictionary”**

The Athenian philosophers in calling Paul a *spermologos*, or “ignorant plagiarist,” meant that he retained odds and ends of knowledge which he had picked up from others, without possessing himself any system of thought or skill of language—without culture. In fact it was a fairly correct description of the Athenian philosophers themselves in Paul’s day.

**Ramsay, “St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen”**

*“he seems to be advocating foreign gods”*

Socrates was charged 450 years earlier with advocating ‘new’ gods and corrupting the youth.

His accusers hoped to force him to beg for mercy but instead, at his trial attended by more than 500 jurors, he lectured to them about their ignorance.

They asked him to suggest his own punishment and he recommended they build a statue in his honor and place it in the main square.

He was condemned to death, 280-220.

He drank hemlock.

Now, Paul is proclaiming “*foreign gods*” – plural.

*“Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection”.*

“They apparently viewed Paul as proclaiming a new divine ‘couple’: ‘Jesus’ (a masculine form that sounds like the Greek Isis),

and ‘Resurrection’ (a feminine form), being the personified powers of ‘healing’ and ‘restoration.”

**Greg Bahnsen**

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**Vs 19. “Areopagus”**

Two questions have to be answered in regard to the scene that follows: why was Paul taken before the Council? and what were the intentions of the philosophers in taking him there? It is clear that Paul appeared to the philosophers as one of the many ambitious teachers who came to Athens hoping to find fame and fortune at the great centre of education. Now, certain powers were vested in the Council of Areopagus to appoint or invite lecturers at Athens, and to exercise some general control over the lecturers in the interests of public order and morality. There is an almost complete lack of evidence what were the advantages and the legal rights

of a lecturer thus appointed, and to what extent or in what way a strange teacher could find freedom to lecture in Athens.

There existed something in the way of privileges vested in the recognised lecturers; ... There certainly also existed much freedom for foreigners to become lecturers in Athens, for the great majority of the Athenian professors and lecturers were foreign. The scene described in vv. 18-34 seems to prove that the recognised lecturers could take a strange lecturer before the Areopagus, and require him to give an account of his teaching and pass a test as to its character. When they took him to the court to satisfy the supreme university tribunal of his qualifications, they probably entertained some hope that he would be overawed before that august body, or that his teaching might

not pass muster, as being of unsettling tendency (for no body is so conservative as a University Court).

**Sir William Ramsey, “St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen”**

They wanted to hear Paul to determine if (1) he was a charlatan plagiarist, or (2) preaching corruption to the youth.

**Vs 19b-21** “*may we know...mean*”, “*All the Athenians...latest ideas*”

This message of Paul’s wasn’t a mixture of philosophical bits, but rather a radical new message.

The targets took the bait.

Target Preparation led to Target Proclamation.

Target Preparation: Paul’s message was new to them but theirs wasn’t new to him!

Why did Paul go to Athens? Because he was Prepared?

Probably not. He went there because of persecution.

BUT he was prepared nonetheless.

He was going to their ‘neck of the woods’, therefore, he was prepared.

If we are going to be in the neighborhood, we need to be prepared for whatever possibilities to share arise - NOT to rebuke them or blast their beliefs, but rather share the Gospel VIA their beliefs!

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**Vs 22** “*Men of Athens*”, “*very religious*”

Didn't Paul say, “You idolatrous vipers! Don’t you know that you are.....”

No. He didn’t rebuke them. He used what they believed to share the Gospel.

**G1175** ἀσέβεια deisidaimonia

**Thayer Definition:**

1) in a good sense

1a) reverencing god or the gods, pious, religious

2) in a bad sense

2a) superstitious

3) religious

**Part of Speech:** noun feminine

**A Related Word by Thayer’s/Strong’s Number:** from the same as

G1174

**Citing in TDNT:** 2:20, 137

**Total KJV Occurrences:** 1

**superstition, 1**

Acts 25:19

“this term normally denotes piety either as religion or (sometimes) as excessive fear of the gods....it is a good

neutral expression for religion”

TDNT, abridged

**Vs 23** “*as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship*”

**G333** Πράως ἰδέσθαι, anatheoôreoô

**Thayer Definition:**

1) to look at attentively, to consider well, to observe accurately

**Part of Speech:** verb

**A Related Word by Thayer’s/Strong’s Number:** from G303 and

G2334

**Total KJV Occurrences:** 2

**beheld, 1**

Acts 17:23

**considering, 1**

Heb 13:7

Target Preparation!!!

He spent time preparing to speak to them by finding out what they believed and were worshipping.

He found through this preparation an Evangelistic Entry Point.

“*I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*”

Paul prepared for, looked for, and found an evangelistic entry point to present the gospel to the Athenians.

There are Evangelistic Entry Points everywhere!

Paul didn’t need to be a Greek philosopher or scholar to reach them.

He simply found an entry point upon which to build the simple Gospel message.  
In my life, I usually let the people I'm targeting, talk first without my reproof.  
I listen for possible entry points into their lives.  
Then I try and develop a Gospel message for them.  
Sometimes I may not have time – in addition to Target Preparation, we have this promise...

*Matt. 10:18-20 (NIV)*

On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. [19]But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, [20]for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

*“UNKNOWN GOD”*

Whether idol worshippers or philosophers, the Gospel is the same for all.

- Who God Is (Unmade Creator)
- Who Man Is (Fallen Creation)
- What God Did (Death and Resurrection)
- What God Will Do (Judge World)
- What Man Needs To Do (Repent)

This is the essence of Simple Target Preparation: the simple Gospel for all.

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## Paul's Targeted Areopagus Speech

### 1. Target Preparation

a. Acts 17:22-23 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. [23] For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you

### 2. Target Proclamation

#### a. Who the Unknown God Is

##### i. Creator of All

1. Acts 17:24a "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth
2. Acts 17:26a From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth;

##### ii. Sustainer of All

1. Acts 17:25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.
2. Acts 17:28 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' \*

##### iii. Ruler of All

1. Acts 17:26b and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.
2. Acts 17:27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

#### b. Who the Unknown God Is Not

- i. Acts 17:29 "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill.
- ii. Acts 17:24b and does not live in temples built by hands.

#### c. What the Unknown God Demands

i. Acts 17:30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

#### d. What the Unknown God Will Do

i. Acts 17:31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Epicureans: denied world made by God.

Stoics: universe created by God; God was the soul of the world; all things were a part of God.

To these beliefs – vss 24-26a, **Creator of All**.

Epicureans: God did not control the world or care about the world.

Stoics: All things, including God, were under the control of Fate.

To these beliefs – **vss. 26b-28, Ruler of All and Sustainer of All.**

Epicureans: Soul was material and annihilated at death.

Stoics: Some, soul exists until universe's destruction; some, soul would be absorbed into the divine essence and become a part of God; some, immortality was restricted to the wise and good.

To these beliefs – **vss 30-31, What the Unknown God Demands and What the Unknown God Will Do.**

Athenians: Idolatrous.

To these activities – **vss 24b, 29, Who the Unknown God is Not.**

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Paul targeted their beliefs not by apologetically destroying them, but by sharing the Gospel even using their beliefs.  
**Acts 17:32-34 (NIV)**

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." [33] At that, Paul left the Council. [34] A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

**Acts 18:1 (NIV)**

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

Target Evangelism may appear to have been unsuccessful since only a few believed.

But considering the idolatry and demonic oppression in Athens, the fact that some came to Christ is incredible.

Target Evangelism succeeded.

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#### **Further Notes** (unformatted)

In Athens there was...

- Altar of Eumenides
- Altar of the 12 gods
- Hermes (statues at every entrance to the city)
- Temple of Ares
- Temple of Apollo Petros
- Image of Neptune on Horseback
- Sanctuary of Bacchus
- 40 foot high statue of Athena, mother goddess of city
- Doric Temple of Athena
- Parthenon

In Athens, they had...

- Festival to Athena (each summer)
- Festival to Apollo (each summer)
- Festival to Demeter (spirit of fertility) (fall)
- Festival to Poseidon (spirit of sea and spirit of earthquakes in midwinter)
- Festival to the Dead called Anthesterion (feast of flowers in early Spring, honoring the spirit of death)
- Festival of Dionysus (spirit of wine and harvest) (late spring)
- Festival to Zeus (spirit of sky and weather) (beginning of summer)

#### **"Epicureans"**

They were the followers of Epicurus, a philosopher who was born in Samos in 341 BC, and who taught first in Asia Minor and afterward in Athens till his death in 270 BC.

....

The aim and end of life for every man is his own happiness, and happiness is primarily defined as pleasure.

"Wherefore we call pleasure the Alpha and Omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing" (Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus). ... Epicurus taught that life should be so lived as to secure the greatest amount of pleasure during its whole course. And in this larger outlook, the pleasures of the mind came to occupy a larger place than the pleasures of the body. For happiness consists not so much in the satisfaction of desires, as in the suppression of wants, and in arriving at a state of independence of all circumstances,

which secures a peace of mind that the privations and changes of life cannot disturb. .... Man's aim should be to suppress all desires that are unnecessary, and especially such as are artificially produced....

Epicurus' definition of the end of life and of the way to it bears a superficial resemblance to that of his opponents, the Stoics. The end sought by both is ataraxia, "imperturbability," a peace of mind that transcends all circumstances, and the way to it is the life according to Nature. But Nature for Epicurus is purely physical and material, and the utmost happiness attainable is the complete absence of pain. ....

.... The original constituents of the universe, of which no account could be given, were atoms, the void, and motion. By a fixed law or fate, the atoms moved through the void, so as to form the world as we know it. The same uniform necessity maintains and determines the abiding condition of all that exists. Epicurus modified this system so far as to admit an initial freedom to the atoms, which enabled them to divert slightly from their uniform straight course as they fell like rain through space, and so to impinge, combine and set up rotatory motions by which the worlds, and all that is in them, came into being.

From the same premises one would expect the complete denial of any Divine beings. But it is a curiosity of the system that a grossly materialistic theory of knowledge should require the affirmation of the existence of the gods. Men's ideas are derived from thin material *films* that pass from the objects around them into the kindred matter of their minds. It follows that every idea must have been produced by a corresponding object. Men generally possess ideas of gods. Therefore, gods must exist to produce those ideas, which come to men in sleep and dreams. But they are not such gods as men generally believe to exist. They are constituted of the same atomic matter as men, but of a still finer texture. They dwell in the *intermundia*, the interspaces outside the worlds, where earthly cares and the dissolution of death cannot approach them. They are immortal and completely blessed. They cannot therefore know anything of the world, with its pain and its troubles, nor can they be in any way concerned with it. They are apotheoses of the Epicurean sage, entirely withdrawn from the world's turmoil, enjoying a life of calm repose, and satisfied with the bounty that Nature provides for them. ....

"For the nature of the gods must ever in itself of necessity enjoy immortality with supreme repose, far removed and withdrawn from our concerns; since exempt from every pain, exempt from all dangers, strong in its own resources, not wanting aught of us, it is neither gained by favors nor moved by anger" (Lucretius). All religion is banned, though the gods are retained. Epicurus' failure to carry the logic of his system to the denial of the gods lies deeper than his theory of ideas. ....

### **ISBE**

"Stoics"

This school of Greek philosophy was founded at Athens circa 294 BC by Zeno (circa 336-264 BC), a native of Citium, a Greek colony in Cyprus. ....therefore their metaphysics inclined to be a materialistic pantheism. On the one side, Nature is the organization of material atoms by the operation of its own uniform and necessary laws. On the other side, it is a living, rational being, subduing all its parts to work out a rational purpose inherent in the whole. As such it may be called Providence or God. ....While the Stoics rejected the forms and rites of popular religion, they defended belief in God and inculcated piety and reverence toward Him. Their pantheism provided a basis for Greek polytheism also alongside of their monism, for where all the world is God, each part of it is divine, and may be worshipped. Another consequence of their pantheism was their attitude to evil, which they held to be only apparently or relatively evil, but really good in the harmony of the whole. Therefore they bore evil with courage and cheerfulness, because they believed that "all things worked together for good" absolutely. ....They summed up their moral teaching in the ideal of the sage or the wise man. His chief characteristic is ataraxy, a calm passionless mastery of all emotions, and independence of all circumstances. He therefore lives a consistent, harmonious life, in conformity with the perfect order of the universe. He discovers this order by knowledge or wisdom. But the Stoics also defined this ideal as a system of particular duties, such as purity in one's self, love toward all men, and reverence toward God.... it is no improbable inference that the Epicureans mocked, while the Stoics desired to hear more. For they would find much in the apostle's teaching that harmonized with their own views. Paul's quotation from the classics in his Athenian speech was from the Stoic poet, Aratus of Soli in Cilicia: "For we are also his offspring." His doctrine of creation, of divine immanence, of the spirituality and fatherhood of God, would be familiar and acceptable to them. His preaching of Christ would not have been unwelcome to them, who were seeking for the ideal wise man.... it is possible that Paul had learnt much from the Stoic school at Tarsus.

### **ISBE**

Areopagus

Five centuries earlier Socrates was brought to this very Areopagus to face the charges of his accusers.... This court exercised the right of capital punishment.... The Areopagus saw that the laws in force were observed and executed by the properly constituted authorities; it could bring officials to trial for their acts while in office, even raise



ἐὰν οὐκ ἐπινοήσῃ, etc. We have found out the UNKNOWN god at ATHENS—and worshipped him with our hands stretched up to heaven; and we will give thanks unto him, as being thought worthy to be subject to this power. Philostratus, in vit. Apollon. vi. 3, notices the same thing, though he appears to refer to several altars thus inscribed: ἐὰν οὐκ ἐπινοήσῃ, ἢ ἐὰν ἀγνοῖ ἢ ἐὰν ἀνοήτῃ, And this at ATHENS, where there are ALTARS even to the UNKNOWN GODS. Pausanias, in Attic. cap. 1. p. 4, edit. Kuhn., says that at Athens there are ἀγνοῦντων ἑστῆσαν ἄλτάρων, altars of gods which are called, The UNKNOWN ones. Minutius Felix says of the Romans, *Aras extruunt etiam ignotis numinibus*. “They even build altars to UNKNOWN DIVINITIES.” And Tertullian, contra Marcion, says, *Invenio plane Diis ignotis aras prostitutas: sed Attica idolatria est*. “I find altars allotted to the worship of unknown gods: but this is an Attic idolatry.”  
“Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the New Testament”