

The purpose of this leader's guide is to be a tool for ABF and Life Group leaders to follow the sermon series with their group. Our hope is that this guide will give you a head start for your study and will allow your group to respond to what they've heard and apply it for life.

### Acts 17:16-34

**Context/Observation:** The city of Athens was the intellectual capital of the Graeco-Roman world. Before the rise of the Roman empire, it was the leading political and cultural center of the Greek world. After it was conquered by Rome, it remained the center of learning for the whole Empire. In this passage we meet the Stoics and the Epicureans, representing two schools of philosophy of that time. The Epicureans did not deny the existence of the gods, but they considered them completely remote from the world and life. Therefore, they saw history as being random, and life as being without any meaning. After death there was nothing. As a result, this philosophy counseled that people should pursue whatever brought them pleasure and fulfillment. The Stoics believed in God as the “world spirit” (a form of “pantheism”) which fixed the fate of everyone and everything. They counseled the pursuit not of pleasure but of duty, and to courageously accept and face whatever that fate was.

Paul's mission to Athens is instructive because it shows how he approaches the pagan “cultural elites” of his day (who were not very different from our own). The “Areopagus” was a council of the greatest philosophers, opinion-leaders, and influence-brokers. It did not have governing authority, but it controlled matters of religion and culture. The city of Athens was filled with examples of artistic beauty, particularly its statues of the Greek gods and the architectural magnificence of its temples. Paul, however, was deeply troubled by the idolatry that the art represented. He was deeply troubled to see the entire city devoted to false gods represented by idols. Paul spoke to their culture and pointed them to the one true God and Christ as resurrected.

#### Questions (vv. 17-23):

1) What can we tell about how Paul reasoned in the marketplace? How does he gain the interest of his hearers in vv.22-23?

- We are not told many details about what Paul said in the marketplace, we are only told that he spoke about two things: a) the good news about Jesus, and b) the resurrection. This gives us some idea about how he “reasoned” there. He did not argue that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Scripture. Instead, he argued first, for the true God, second the deity of Christ and third, for the historicity of the resurrection. One does not have to assume the infallibility of the Bible to argue for those things.
- Paul first gains interest by making a very courteous remark about the Athenians religiosity (“Men of Athens, I perceive in every way you are very religious.”) A compliment aimed your way is always interesting to you! Second, Paul makes use of an altar built “to an unknown God” (v.23). This is another important element of gaining interest — it is moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Paul begins with something they know about, something familiar to them, something they themselves do. Third, Paul very subtly appeals to the Athenians admission of ignorance about the divine. Paul sees the altar as the Athenians acknowledgement of the limitations of their religion. The reason they made such an altar was because they had a deep sense that they were missing something in their religion, that they had not really broken through. Paul is saying, “That God that you know you have missed, that you have not been able to discover — He is the one I will reveal to you today.” Because of this many wanted to hear more and even some believed.

### **Questions (vv. 24-31):**

- 1)** What six principles does Paul lay out to show them who the true God is?
  - (1) That God is the Creator of the world (v.24).
  - (2) That God is therefore transcendent and not dependent on us or the world or anything in it (v.25)
  - (3) On the other hand, that God is purposeful and Lord over all history. (v.26)
  - (4) That God made us to know him and for fellowship with him (v.27)
  - (5) That God cannot be worshipped through idols or images, things that man creates. (v.29)
  - (6) That God has made Jesus Christ Judge of the whole world. (v.30-31).
- 2)** Why are these principles so important to our lives and to those who do not know Christ?
  - Creator: We live under God's authority as our creator.
  - Great I AM: We serve a God who did not need creation to be a loving God. God is love fully within Himself, the complexity of the trinity.
  - His Glory: We were created for him and by him to bring glory to him. God is sovereign and Lord over his creation and those who follow him are a reflection and demonstration of his redeeming love.
  - Redeeming Love: God through his mercy and grace chose to redeem us and bring us back into fellowship with him.
  - Worship Creator not Created things: We are not to worship creation, but the creator. The creation reflects God's power and glory and He alone is worthy of our praise. Let us not exchange our worship of the Creator for worship of creation.
  - Jesus is our final Judge: God has appointed Jesus as Lord and Christ and the final judge of all things. Christ is the Just and the Justifier of all those who believe. All peoples will give an account to the one who paid the ultimate sacrifice for them.

### **General Reflection:**

- 1)** What does this passage teach us about God?
- 2)** What does this passage teach us about mankind?
- 3)** What is a command to obey in this passage? What has God revealed in your life that needs changing?

### **Personal Reflection/Application**

- 4)** In our city, surrounded by idolatry, are we provoked by so many idols? How can we use these things to point people to the one true God?
- 5)** What philosophies and pagan religions do you encounter? Thinking through the principles mentioned above, how are they applicable to the engaging the people you know?
- 6)** The worship of idols should break our hearts. What can we do in our lives to grow a burden for people who are chasing after created things and not the Creator?

### **Prayer**

Ask God to give you a compassion for those who worship false gods. Pray for God to open their eyes to see the one true God.

\*Various observations and questions in this study guide are quoted from resources on Acts (John Stott, Tim Keller, ESV study bible, and Crossway).