

Small Group Study

Our Vision

To know God and enjoy Him forever.

Our Mission

To build a Christian community by making fully devoted disciples of non-religious and nominally religious people



Discussion

Power with Purpose: The Gospel in Surprising Places

Scripture

Have volunteers read the following scripture:

Acts 17:16-34 (NLT)

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. 17 He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there.

18 He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, "What's this babbling about? He's picked up some strange ideas!" Others said, "He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods."

19 Then they took him to the high council of the city. "Come and tell us about this new teaching," they said. 20 "You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it's all about." 21 (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.)

22 So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, 23 for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.

24 "He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples, 25 and human hands can't serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. 26 From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.

27 "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. 28 For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' 29 And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.

Ice Breaker

Use ONE of the questions to help people open up and to focus your meeting. It is very helpful to go around in a circle with the leader going first. (Remember if you have new members or guests you should take time to introduce everyone.)

- 1.** What is one place you've been or one thing you've done that we might be surprised to learn about you?
- 2.** Have you either been to Greece, read a greek book, seen a greek movie, eaten greek food, or maybe you know someone who is greek? Tell us about it/them.
- 3.** What has been the highlight of this past week for you?

30 "God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. 31 For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."

32 When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, "We want to hear more about this later." 33 That ended Paul's discussion with them, 34 but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Introduction

Paul was on his second missionary journey and had to leave Berea in a hurry because of angry Jews. Friends took him to Athens where he was hanging around waiting for Silas and Timothy. This whole trip was not part of the plan. So he does a bit of sightseeing.

There is something fascinating about Paul in Athens: the great Christian apostle amidst the glories of ancient Greece. He had known about Athens since boyhood. Everyone did. Now for the first time he visits the city he had heard so much about. He is alone in the cultural center of the world. What was his reaction?

Athens was filled with altars, images, and statues dedicated to the Greek gods. Religion was a very important aspect in Greek society and culture. They worshipped many gods, creating a polytheistic society. They believed that the gods controlled all natural and social areas of life, that they had to be appeased, that they were immortal, and that they dwelt on Mount Olympus.

Now while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there. (Acts 17:16-17)

Paul steps into this plethora of philosophy and religion and uses an altar to an unknown god to cross the barriers and identify in them something that all of humanity has in common, despite our various cultures and context, and that is this innate desire to search for meaning in life. There is something inside of us that yearns, longs for more: an existential longing, a global phenomenon that unites the human race. Ecclesiastes 3:11 alludes to this when the writer says that God has put eternity in the hearts of humanity, but we simply cannot fathom this.

God is an unutterable sigh, planted in the depths of the soul. -Jean Paul Richter

Paul addresses this yearning in one of his most compelling speeches. He makes the following points:

1. The Creator God cannot be put in a box – Acts 17:22-24
Paul uses this inner search to point them to the Author and Creator of life. The Source of the search: a God that cannot be put into a nice neat carving or temple. God is bigger!
2. The Creator is not bound by rules of mankind – Acts 17:25-27
Rules and laws exist because a broken humanity needs boundaries. In his speech, Paul suggests that the Creator of the universe is not bound by rules, because he is the one who set everything in place: the rhythm of life, the natural laws that govern our planet. He created order – but order did not create Him. The minute we try to define God by mere rules, or even traditions, we run the risk of our conclusions being flawed. The Creator of the Universe is not served by humans or rules. He is above these.
3. Humanity exists through the providence of its Creator – Acts 17:26-28
Paul is showing that humanity is not a haphazard invention. Rather, that there is an Intelligent Designer behind creation. That all of humanity was purposed by God, and not only that, but according to Hebraic thought, unlike Greek thought, humanity is not just an after-thought or amusement of the gods, rather men and women are the image bearers of God. In our spiritual DNA we have an eternal history that cannot be reduced to scientific formulas or fate.

4. The Creator has us on a search that shows up idolatry as futile – Acts 17:29-30
"God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself because it is not there. There is no such thing." C.S. Lewis
 Whatever form of idolatry – it eventually is revealed as futile. Existential longing is not satisfied in things or philosophies or within ourselves – only God can satisfy that.
5. The Creator has an answer to the yearning: Jesus Christ – Acts 17:31-34
 We can assume that Paul's speech recorded by Luke was shortened. It would be a safe assumption that he would have explained the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to them. Jesus said that when you see me you see the Father – you observe my actions and words and you observe your Creator.

For the Epicurian and Stoic philosophers this was mere foolishness. The concept of a physical resurrection was ridiculous, and salvation that comes in the form of a human God who sacrifices Himself out of love for His creation seemed totally absurd. And for so many it still seems absurd today.

Paul's argument to the Athenians is that the longing/search that is in every human heart acts as evidence of the existence of a Creator – and that this search should awaken in us the acknowledgement of God – a God who manifested Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ. Paul's conclusion is that in Christ the futility of idolatry is revealed, in Christ God's love is made manifest, and in Christ existential longing is satisfied!

Questions

1. How did the author, Luke, describe Athens and its inhabitants? (17:16, 21, 23)
2. Is our city "full of idols"? Name idols people worship in our culture.
3. The Epicureans believed that man's goal was pleasure and happiness, and that if gods did exist, they were not involved in human affairs. The Stoics felt that a sovereign directed history and man's lot in life was simply to accept life as it came. What are some of the philosophies of our day? Why is it important that we understand them?
4. How do these philosophies affect our thinking/behavior as followers of Christ?
5. How is the Gospel received amongst such diverse philosophies/religions in our culture today?
6. Are we articulating/presenting a clear Gospel? If not, why not?
7. How does Paul's speech challenge your thinking and approach with the culture you live in?
8. What is so important about the resurrection that Paul uses it as proof for all that he is saying?
9. Why do you think so few of these "intellectuals" came to faith? What is the value of head knowledge and scholarship? When is it an asset? When can it become a hindrance?

God bless,

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