

## STUDY GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

### The Journeys of Paul

Week 6: Week of February 23, 2020

Sermon Title: *“Who (or What) Are You Worshipping”*

Text: Acts 17:16-34

#### (For Facilitators mainly - optional for the group)

#### Background

- The period after Philippi was unsettled. The mission strategy for Macedonia becomes clear (remember the dream?):
  - 1) to concentrate on principal cities (Thessalonica was capital of the province)
  - 2) to focus the effort in and through the synagogue.
- See the normal pattern: initial interest and positive response among Jews and Gentile sympathizers - followed by Jewish opposition - resulting in civic unrest and departure to another city (17:1-66).
- The climax of this chapter is the encounter with the Greek philosophies and their religious presuppositions in Athens.
- Paul appeals to the first principles of a natural theology against the false human misconceptions of God, with the distinctive Christian message drawn in only allusively at the end (17:22-31). The response is disappointing: a few believe, but most hear the distinctive Christian claim with scorn (17:32-34). The typical Jew and Greek thought that the Christian gospel had little appeal and made little sense (I Cor. 1:22)

#### 17:16-34 – The Gospel of God Encounters Greek Philosophy

- Although the initial strategy is to seek out Jews and God fearers (17:17), it is the **prevalent idolatry** of the city which first catches Paul’s attention (17:16), and what happens takes Paul into a new dimension of apologetic and evangelism. He encounters Epicurean and Stoic photospheres who find his talk of Jesus and Resurrection (two new deities?) confusing and give him the opportunity for a fuller exposition (17:18-20).
- The speech is one of the briefest. At the heart is a two-fold protest:
  - 1) against the multiplication of deities as the proper expression of religiosity;
  - 2) against the assumption that God can somehow be contained within humanly made shrines or images.
- The first, is not presented in terms of the Christian story, but starts with a proper **understanding of God, of the one God, Creator of all that is**. The language used builds as much as possible on contacts with the wider philosophies of the time (particularly Stoicism) but

is basically Jewish monotheism (the belief that there is only one God) and creation theology presented in its universal implications.

- God the Creator is sovereign, maker of all things and of all nations. God's creation means that **there is a God-given relatedness between God and humanity, which only finds appropriate expression in a non-idolatrous worship**. Human attempts to manipulate God through the service offered him in shrine and cult, or to image God in representations of gold, silver or stone, are things of which to repent. Athens' religiosity in the multiplication of idols is needing corrected. The complete continuity of Christian preaching with already traditional Jewish faith within the wider Greek world is reaffirmed.
- Implicit is the fact that this strand of Jewish theology provides a different basis for the relationship between Jew and Gentile than had developed within mainstream Judaism. Here it is humanity as a whole which is in view, at a more basic level than that of Jew vs. Gentile, or even of Greek vs. barbarian.
- The basic reasoning for Jewish anti-idolatry monotheism is added at the end of the chapter with a reference to the **'man' appointed by God to judge the world and raised by God from the dead (17:31)**. **This is where the Christian story is drawn upon**. But some things are worth noting
  1. Jesus is not "named" or "identified" and so the story of his continuity with Israel's history and prophecy is not a factor – which is in contrast to speeches to Jews (chapters 2 and 13).
  2. Jesus is named only as a "man whom he (God) has appointed", so that the basic monotheistic thrust of the overall speech is not compromised and the misunderstanding implicit in the philosophers' impression in 17:18 is corrected.
  3. The attempted point of contact is through the idea of final judgment and resurrection; no mention is made of the cross.
- **The focus on resurrection in both 17:18 and 31 confirms that in a Greek context as well as a Jewish, the claim that God had raised Jesus from the dead stood at the center of the Christian gospel**. Luke is attempting to portray the message which he thought was appropriate to Paul's mission to the Greek philosophers or what Paul would have said on the occasion.
- **The message about Jesus and his resurrection can only be rightly understood within the context of Jewish belief in the one God and Creator of all.**

**Epicureanism** – a practical philosophy whose objective was to secure a happy life and to maximize the experience of pleasure. The Epicureans held a theory according to which the world and the gods were a long way away from one another, with little or no communication. The result was that one should get on with life as best one could, discovering how to gain maximum pleasure from a quiet, sedate existence. It taught that the soul died with the body (giving freedom from fear of death), and that the gods do not interfere with the natural world (giving freedom from fear of the supernatural). The

relevance of a message and the likelihood that it would find little resonance with the Epicureans, is clear.

**Stoicism** taught that the aim of the philosopher should be to live in harmony with nature, guided by the reason which they identified with God and which manifests itself both in providence and in human reason. To live in harmony with this reason is the only good; everything else is a matter of indifference. The Stoics believed that divinity lay within the present world, and within each human being, so that this divine force, though hardly personal, could be discovered and harnessed. Good human living then ('virtue') consisted in getting in touch with, and living according to, this inner divine 'rationality'.

- Paul attempts to build on points of contact and commonality between Stoicism and Jewish monotheism. The charge of proclaiming "foreign deities" echoes those brought against Socrates. This was deliberate on Luke's part since the trial and death of Socrates in 399bc was one of the most famous episodes in Athens' history. The implication of Luke's description is that Paul was both misunderstood and a teacher of integrity, like Socrates himself.
- The Athenians didn't understand Paul's preaching about Jesus. The point being whenever the gospel is proclaimed, that without an appropriate background of language and tradition, the gospel is always likely to meet with incomprehension and misunderstanding.
- It is this openness of Athenian religion, which gives Paul a point of contact: he proclaims no new god, but one they had themselves recognized, even inadequately. At the same time, the objective will be to proclaim this unknown God as the only God. A too liberal religiosity had lost all focus and coherence, to which the religious sense of Jewish monotheism was the answer.

## Discussion Questions

### Opening Questions (optional – pick only the ones you want to choose).

- If someone made a statue of you, what pose would it be and what would the inscription read?
- What suspicions do people have or what accusations do they make regarding Christians today?

### For reflection (not in any order – again, pick the ones you feel might be best for the group. Do not feel like you have to get through all the questions☺)

*The invitation for Paul to speak with the Areopagus was not as friendly as it sounds. Calling him a "babbler" or "word-scatterer" is clearly derogatory (v. 18). It wasn't a matter of, "Well, here's an interesting fellow; let's see what he has to say." It contained a doubled veiled threat. "This man," they said, "seems to be preaching of foreign divinities." This charge was leveled at Socrates.*

1. Where does idol worship exist today? What forms does it take? Who are the worshipers?
2. How do you interpret Exodus 20:4-6 in our day and age?
3. In Acts 17:22-34, how does Paul take what was there in the marketplace and turn the people's attention to the true God revealed in Jesus?
4. What differences does Paul draw between the idols and the true God?
5. As noted earlier, the Epicureans held there is simply not enough evidence for us to be able to tell whether the gods exist or not, and if they do, what if anything they want from us. What parts of Paul's address would they have agreed with and what would they have found objectionable?
6. The Stoics believed that divinity lay within the present world and within each human being. What parts of Paul's address would they have agreed with and what would they have found troubling?
7. What points did Paul make about God in the following sections of his message?  
17:24,25;17:26-28;17:29;17:30,31
8. According to Paul, how does God verify that Jesus is the coming judge?
9. How does this passage help us in our testimony of the one true God?
10. John Calvin once said, "The human mind is a perpetual factory for idols." How relevant is that statement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? For 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians?
11. In what ways can a church become idolatrous?
12. Are any of us struggling with "idol worship"? In what ways can the group pray for each other in our own areas of struggling of idolatry
13. In your opinion, what reflections of Greek philosophy are found in our beliefs?
14. How would you answer the question "Who or what are you worshipping?"
15. How significant to you is your identity as a follower of Jesus? Have you ever been criticized for your belief in Christ? Describe.