

Leader Preparation Guide

To an Unknown God

Movement Two: Creating Space for an Encounter · Acts 17:16-34

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

Discover how the Gospel gets proposed to people who share no framework with us at all: Paul starts from what they already have, quotes what they already read, never opens an Old Testament, and still lands on repentance, judgment, and a man raised from the dead. Then discover what the normal result looks like.

Catholic Touchstone

The Church teaches definitively that God can be known with certainty by the natural light of human reason from created things, and she has long recognised seeds of truth and of the Word scattered outside her visible boundaries. The first is defined teaching; the second is a developed formulation. Grace builds on nature. That is why Paul could start with an altar instead of a proof text, and why he still had to get to the Resurrection.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

What Paul felt, and what Paul said

Verse 16: while he waited at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw the city full of idols. The Greek *parōxyneto* is strong: deeply provoked, indignant, distressed. Anger and exasperation are possible nuances rather than a settled emotional diagnosis.

Now read the speech. Luke records no outburst. He does not call them idolaters, does not open with judgment, and does not tell them how the city looks to him. His opposition does surface, at verses 29 to 31, as a conclusion rather than an opening. What he felt and what he said were not the same thing, and that gap is a discipline rather than a dishonesty.

This is worth naming for your group early. Most of us have the opposite problem: we feel mildly uncomfortable and say something scorching.

Where he worked, and what they called him

Verse 17: he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with whoever happened to be there. Note that Luke attaches "every day" to the marketplace. He did not wait to be invited.

Verse 18: Epicureans and Stoics take him on. Some say, "What would this babblers say?" The word is *spermologos*, literally a seed picker, a bird pecking up scraps, used of someone who collects bits of learning he does not really understand. It is contempt, and it is the first review Paul gets in Athens.

Others said he seemed to be a preacher of foreign divinities, "because he preached Jesus and the resurrection." Some scholars suggest they heard *Anastasis*, resurrection, as the name of a consort goddess alongside Jesus. It is a plausible and commonly offered suggestion, not a certainty; offer it that way if it comes up.

The opening move

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To an unknown god."

He had walked the city and looked at things. The opening is not a compliment strategy; it is the fruit of actually paying attention to what these people cared about. Then he takes one object out of their own city and says: what you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.

A note for accuracy. Ancient writers do attest altars to unknown gods at Athens, and Paul's report is entirely plausible. There is no surviving inscription matching his exact singular wording. Say "ancient sources attest altars of this kind" rather than claiming archaeologists have found Paul's altar, because they have not.

What he actually argues, and what is missing

Verses 24 to 28: God made the world and everything in it; he is Lord of heaven and earth; he does not live in shrines made by man; he is not served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything; he made from one every nation of men; he determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God and perhaps feel after him and find him, yet he is not far from each one of us.

Now notice what is absent. He never quotes the Old Testament. Not once. To this audience he argues from creation, from human dependence, from the universal human search, and from their own literature. The content is thoroughly biblical, shaped by Scripture and Jewish monotheism; what he quotes and what he starts from are theirs.

Verse 28 quotes two lines. "In him we live and move and have our being" is traditionally attributed to Epimenides, and that attribution is old but not secure. "For we are indeed his offspring" is from the *Phaenomena* of Aratus, and that one is solid; a similar line appears in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*. Give your group the difference between the two attributions honestly. It is a small worked example of the discipline this whole study is trying to teach.

Where he lands, and what he refuses to trim

Verses 29 to 31. Therefore we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. God overlooked the times of ignorance, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.

Read that list again. Repentance, commanded, of everyone, everywhere. A fixed day of judgment. A man appointed as judge. A bodily resurrection offered as public assurance. There is not one soft word in it.

The poets gave him a point of contact. They bought him no discount. This is the sentence to have ready when somebody in your group worries that starting where people are means ending where they are.

The result, which is the point of the session

Verse 32: some mocked. Some said, "We will hear you again about this." Some joined him and believed, and Luke names two of them, Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

Three responses: derision, deferral, and faith. A mixed result like that is normal and unsurprising in Acts, and any group that measures itself against the about three thousand of Pentecost will quit somewhere in year two.

There is a longstanding preaching tradition that Athens was Paul's failure and that 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 is his repentance for it. Tonight's build-then-press takes that apart, so do not spend it here. Read the section before you lead.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The idol that has to be carried

Isaiah 44:9-20 is the great satire: a man cuts down a tree, burns half of it to warm himself and bake his bread, and worships what is left. See also Psalm 115:4-8 and Psalm 135:15-18, where the idols have mouths and do not speak, eyes and do not see, and those who make them become like them. Paul's "not served by human hands as though he needed anything" is standing squarely on this tradition, even though he never cites it.

Boundaries and allotted periods

Deuteronomy 32:8: when the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, he fixed the bounds of the peoples. Acts 17:26 stands close to that verse conceptually, offered to men who did not hold it as authoritative.

The nearest thing to Paul's argument in the Old Testament

This is tonight's live discovery, so do not spend it. The passage is Wisdom 13:1-9. Read it yourself before the session, next to Acts 17:26-29, and you will see why the group needs to find it rather than be handed it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | St. Justin Martyr on the seeds of the Word

St. Justin Martyr, writing to defend Christians before a pagan public, teaches in substance that the Word who became flesh in Christ has scattered seeds of himself throughout the human race, so that whatever has been said well by anyone at all belongs by right to Christians.

This is the theological ground under Paul quoting Aratus. Justin does not treat pagan philosophy as equivalent to the fullness of revelation. He does go further than we might expect: at First Apology 46 he says that those who lived according to the Logos, naming Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, were in a qualified sense Christians. His claim is that truth wherever it is found has one owner.

St. Justin Martyr, summarized from his Second Apology, with the seeds-of-the-Logos material conventionally located at chapters 8, 10 and 13, and First Apology 46 for the Logos and the philosophers. A faithful summary of his teaching, not a quotation; the Second Apology chapter divisions are editorial and vary between editions.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | The Second Vatican Council on what the Church does not reject

The Council taught that the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions, and regards with sincere reverence those ways of acting and living, and those precepts and teachings, which often reflect a ray of the Truth that enlightens all people.

Read the next clause too, because it is the one that gets dropped: the Council says this while announcing without ceasing that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, in whom God has reconciled all things to himself. Paul does exactly this in one speech. He takes the altar seriously as a point of contact, and then tells

them to repent.

Second Vatican Council, Nostra Aetate 2 (1965).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH | St. John Paul II on the modern Areopagus

St. John Paul II took this scene as a working image for the Church's situation now, writing that the first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications, and naming others: the commitment to peace, the rights of the person, the development of peoples, culture, and scientific research.

His point is that an Areopagus is any place where a culture does its actual thinking, and that the Church has to go and stand in it rather than waiting for it to come to the parish hall. Ask where your own Areopagus is. Most of us work in one.

St. John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio 37 (1990).

CATECHISM CONNECTION

The Church's confidence that you can begin a conversation about God with someone who has no Bible rests on these paragraphs.

- **CCC 27.** The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God.
- **CCC 32.** Starting from movement, becoming, contingency, and the order and beauty of the world, one can come to a knowledge of God as the origin and end of the universe.
- **CCC 36.** God can be known with certainty from created things by the natural light of human reason. This is taught by the Church and defined at the First Vatican Council; it is not a pious opinion.
- **CCC 28.** Throughout history, in their religions, people have given expression to their quest for God, in ways that are sometimes ambiguous. The Catechism does not flatten this in either direction.
- **CCC 843.** The Church recognizes in other religions a search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near.
- **CCC 856.** Missionary work requires respectful dialogue with those who do not yet accept the Gospel, and it does not stop at dialogue.
- Identifying your workplace as your Areopagus is our extension of these paragraphs and of Redemptoris Missio 37, not their wording.

THREAD WATCH

THREAD WATCH | leader only

Thread A, "With him, and sent." Quiet tonight. Paul is a long way from Antioch and doing this alone in a marketplace. Do not comment.

Thread B, "Whose work is this?" Developed obliquely in verses 26 and 27: God fixed the periods and the boundaries so that they should seek him and perhaps feel after him. The seeking is arranged. Do not resolve.

Thread C, "The room you are afraid of." This is the thread's main development. Paul stands in one of the most intellectually formidable rooms in the ancient world, gets called a seed picker to his face, and keeps

going. If anyone in your group has a workplace or a family table they dread, tonight is their session.

Watch for. The mixed result in verse 32 is the pastoral payload. Someone in your group has already had a conversation that went badly and has concluded they are bad at this. Make sure verse 32 lands on them.

SESSION GOALS

1. Have the group notice the gap between verse 16 and the speech: what Paul felt and what he said were not the same thing.
2. Have them list what Paul argues from, and discover for themselves that the Old Testament is entirely absent.
3. Establish that he trimmed nothing: repentance, judgment, and resurrection are all in the last three verses.
4. Have them find Wisdom 13 next to Acts 17 and see the older Jewish argument Paul is standing in.
5. Dismantle the "Paul failed at Athens" reading using the text rather than by assertion.
6. Send them out to find one true thing in a friend's actual beliefs that they can honestly affirm.

TIMED PLAN

Minutes	Movement
0:00-0:05	Opening prayer.
0:05-0:12	Field report on rung four, the deeper question.
0:12-0:20	Win questions.
0:20-0:26	Read Acts 17:16-34 aloud in full.
0:26-0:38	Build 1 and 2, what Paul felt, where he worked, what they called him.
0:38-0:50	Build 3 and 4, the opening move and what he argues from.
0:50-1:00	Live discovery: Wisdom 13 beside Acts 17.
1:00-1:10	Build 5 and 6, the two quotations and where he lands.
1:10-1:16	Build 7, the three responses.
1:16-1:24	Build 8, the build-then-press on whether Athens was a failure.
1:24-1:30	Send questions, Live It This Week, take-homes, closing prayer.

If you only have 75 minutes, cut these first

- Fold Build 5 (the two poets) into Build 4 and mention the Aratus and Epimenides difference in one sentence. Saves six minutes.
- Run the Wisdom discovery as a single reading of Wisdom 13:1-9 with no hunt, then ask the one question. Saves five minutes.
- Drop Build 2 and summarize *spermologos* yourself in thirty seconds. Saves six minutes.
- Do not cut Build 7 or Build 8. Verse 32 is why this session exists.

IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS

IF IT GOES SIDEWAYS | leader only

If someone concludes that Nostra Aetate means all religions are equally true, read the second half of the paragraph aloud, then read Acts 17:30. The Council and the Apostle both hold the two together, and so should the room.

If someone in the group has real intellectual training and starts running the session as a philosophy seminar, thank them and redirect with a question only the text can answer. This session attracts that, and it will eat the hour.

If someone says they could never do what Paul did because they are not smart enough, hold it. Do not reassure them tonight. Session 6 is built for exactly that person, and it will do a better job than you can do in ninety seconds.

If the room turns cynical about a culture that mocks, name it and turn it: Paul was insulted to his face by better educated men and kept going back to the marketplace daily. Contempt was the environment, not the verdict.

Discussion Guide

To an Unknown God

Acts 17:16-34

OPENING PRAYER

Lord God, you set the boundaries and the seasons so that people would reach out for you and perhaps find you, and you are never far from any one of us. Give us Paul's eyes this week, to walk through an ordinary place and actually see what people are worshiping. Give us his nerve to speak, and his patience with a room that laughs. Amen.

FIELD REPORT

FIELD REPORT | five minutes, no fixing

Five minutes. Two or three people.

Last week you asked one question that went a layer deeper, and then stopped talking. What did they ask for, if anything?

Leader: watch for anyone whose answer is about how the conversation made them feel rather than what the other person said. Ask them once, gently, what the other person actually said.

WIN

- ▶ Where do you spend time with people who share almost none of your assumptions? What is that room like?
- ▶ When has someone taken something you care about seriously before disagreeing with you? What did that do?

BUILD

Read Acts 17:16-34 aloud in full before any discussion. Ask the group to listen for one thing on the first pass: everything Paul refers to that the Athenians already had.

1. Verse 16. What is Paul feeling as he waits in Athens? Now read the speech again. Where does that feeling show up in it?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

His spirit was provoked within him. The Greek word is strong: deeply provoked or indignant. He is not intrigued by the architecture.

And Luke records no outburst. He never calls them idolaters, never opens with judgment, and never tells

them how their city looks to him. He does reach the point in verse 29, that the divine nature is not like gold or silver shaped by human art, but he arrives at it as a conclusion the audience has been walked toward rather than as an accusation he opened with.

Name the discipline out loud, because it is the reverse of most of our habits: he felt strongly and spoke carefully. Most of us feel mildly and speak carelessly.

2. Verses 17 and 18. Where does Paul do this work, and what do they call him?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

In the synagogue with those who already shared his Scriptures, and in the marketplace every day with whoever happened to be there. Luke attaches the daily note to the marketplace, and Paul did not wait for an invitation.

They call him a *spermologos*, a seed picker: a bird pecking up scraps, used of somebody who collects fragments of learning he does not really understand. It is contempt, and it is the first review he gets.

Ask the group what they would have done next. Luke tells us he was reasoning in the marketplace every day.

3. Verses 22 and 23. What is his opening move, and where did he get the material for it?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

He tells them they are very religious, and then cites an altar he found while walking through their city, inscribed to an unknown god. What you worship as unknown, he says, I proclaim to you.

The material came from paying attention. He had walked the city and looked at things, and the opening line of the most famous evangelistic speech in Acts is the fruit of that walk.

One accuracy note for the room. Ancient writers do attest altars to unknown gods at Athens, so Paul's report is entirely plausible, but no surviving inscription matches his exact wording. Say that ancient sources attest altars of this kind. Do not say archaeologists have found Paul's altar, because they have not.

4. Verses 24 to 28. Make a list: what does Paul actually tell them about God? Then make a second list: what is he arguing from?

Do this on paper or a whiteboard. The second list is where the session turns.

ANSWER | share after the discussion

What he tells them: God made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines built by hands, is not served by human hands as though he needed anything, gives everyone life and breath, made every nation from one, set their times and boundaries so that they would seek him, and is not far from any one of us.

What he argues from: creation, human dependence, the universal human search, and their own poets.

Now the second list's most important entry is the one that is missing. He never quotes the Old Testament. Not once, in the whole speech. The content is thoroughly biblical, shaped by Scripture and Jewish monotheism; what he quotes and what he starts from are theirs.

Ask the group directly: what does that mean for a conversation with someone who does not accept the Bible as authoritative?

LIVE DISCOVERY | let the group find it

Do not tell them. Send them to it.

Have someone read Acts 17:26-29 aloud again. Then have a second person read Wisdom 13:1-9.

Ask: what is the same?

What they should find: Wisdom argues that people who studied the world and did not find its Maker are foolish, that they were misled by beautiful things into worshiping them, and, in a striking turn, that these people are "little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him." Acts 17:27 says God arranged the world so that they should seek him and perhaps feel after him and find him. The argument, the sympathy, and even the "perhaps" line up.

Then give them the honest limit. The parallel is real and widely noticed. Whether Paul is consciously drawing on the Book of Wisdom, or whether both are working from a shared Hellenistic Jewish argument about the pagans, is genuinely debated. Do not claim direct dependence. Claim what you can see: this speech stands inside an older Jewish tradition of arguing with pagans sympathetically.

5. Verse 28. He quotes two lines of poetry. What does it mean that Paul had read their poets?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

It means he knew their poetry well enough to quote it aptly, and knew what it meant to the people who loved it. Whether he read the complete works or met the lines through education and common culture, the text does not say.

"For we are indeed his offspring" comes from the *Phaenomena* of Aratus, and a similar line appears in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*. That attribution is solid. "In him we live and move and have our being" is traditionally attributed to Epimenides, and that attribution is old but not secure.

Give the group both, with the difference. It is a small worked example of the discipline this whole study is asking of them: say what you know at the strength you know it. Paul quoting a poet accurately is more useful than any of us quoting one confidently and wrongly.

6. Verses 29 to 31. Where does the speech end up? Make a list of everything he refuses to leave out.

ANSWER | share after the discussion

That the divine nature is not an object shaped by human art. That God commands all people everywhere to repent. That there is a fixed day of judgment. That a man has been appointed to judge. That God has given public assurance of this by raising him from the dead.

There is not one soft word in that list. Repentance, commanded, of everyone. A fixed day. A judge. A bodily resurrection.

This is the sentence to send home: the poets gave him a point of contact; they bought him no discount.

Starting where people are does not mean ending where they are.

7. Verses 32 to 34. How many different responses does Luke report, and what does he bother to record?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Three. Some mocked. Some said they would hear him again about this. Some joined him and believed.

And Luke names two of them: Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris. Luke does not usually stop to name people unless it matters to him that they are remembered.

Three responses, from one speech, by one of the most capable evangelists in the book. Say that plainly to a room that has already had conversations go badly.

8. Someone says: Athens was Paul's failure. He got clever, quoted poets, and converted almost nobody, and afterward he wrote that he had decided to know nothing except Christ crucified. The lesson is to skip the culture and preach the cross. Are they right?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Work the build-then-press below. This is a widely preached reading, it is sincerely held, and the text does not support it.

DIG DEEPER

The seed picker. *Spermologos* was contempt, and it is worth noticing that the Athenians' dismissal of Paul was about his sources: they thought he had picked up scraps he did not understand. He answered by quoting their literature accurately.

A goddess named Resurrection. Some scholars suggest that when the Athenians heard "Jesus and the *anastasis*" they took it as a pair of foreign divinities, a god and his consort. It is a plausible and commonly offered reading; the text does not confirm it.

Dionysius and Damaris. Later tradition made Dionysius the first bishop of Athens, and much later a body of mystical writings was circulated under his name; those writings are now universally recognized as the work of a much later author, conventionally called Pseudo-Dionysius. If someone in your group has read the *Mystical Theology*, this is worth clearing up.

BUILD THEN PRESS

Build the objection at full strength:

Build it at full strength; it has more going for it than most people realize.

The chronology is real. Acts 18:1 has Paul leave Athens and go straight to Corinth, and 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 has him telling the Corinthians that he came to them without lofty words or wisdom, having decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Athens, then Corinth, then that sentence. The sequence is right there.

The results look thin. Two named converts and some others, against about three thousand at Pentecost. And the sophisticated crowd laughed, which is exactly what you might expect when a preacher tries to impress intellectuals on their own ground.

And the strongest form of the objection is textual rather than historical. Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-25: Paul contrasts eloquent wisdom with preaching Christ crucified, and says the cross is folly to Greeks. Now read the Areopagus speech and notice that it never names Jesus and never mentions the cross. The objector can point at the exact thing that is missing. The danger it points to is also genuine. The history of missions is full of contextualization that started as a bridge and ended as a dissolution, where the Gospel was translated into the local idiom so successfully that nothing distinctive survived.

Then press, from the text:

Now press, from the text.

First: Luke never says it failed. He reports mockery, deferral, and belief, and then he stops to name two converts. Luke does not hand out names casually. Whatever the narrator thought of Athens, he thought it produced people worth remembering.

Second: the connection to 1 Corinthians 2 is an inference laid on top of two texts, not something either text says. Paul gives no hint that he is correcting a previous strategy. Read 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 in context and his target is the Corinthians' own appetite for rhetorical showmanship and factional loyalty to impressive speakers. He is describing the manner of his preaching against their taste for performance, not repenting of a method.

Third, look at what he actually preached in Athens. Repentance commanded of everyone, a fixed day of judgment, an appointed judge, and a bodily resurrection. He got mocked for the Resurrection, which is precisely the part the objection accuses him of trimming. **And now the honest concession, which the objection has earned.** The speech as Luke records it never names Jesus and never mentions the cross. That is a real absence and you should say so plainly rather than dance around it. Two things bear on it. Luke tells us at 17:18 that Paul had already been preaching Jesus and the resurrection in the agora before he was brought to the Areopagus, so the recorded address is not the whole of what he said there. And Luke himself never presents the episode as a failure. But the objector is right that the cross is not in the speech.

So what does the passage teach? Two things. That you may start anywhere your hearer actually stands, including their own poets. And that the result will usually be mixed, because it was mixed for Paul in one of the great recorded addresses of the New Testament.

One honest concession to the objector: the danger of dissolving into the culture is real, and this study will keep insisting on the Resurrection as the non-negotiable. Paul is the proof that you can do both.

SEND

- ▶ Where is your Areopagus? Name the actual room, and name what is worshiped there.
- ▶ What is one thing the people you work with genuinely believe that is true, and that you could affirm honestly rather than strategically?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

Rung 5 of the ladder. Find the altar. This week you go looking for what somebody already has.

- Keep praying for the three by name, daily.
- Ask one of the three what they actually believe about God, or about what happens when we die, or about what makes a life good. Ask as though you do not already know the answer, because you probably do not.
- Do not correct anything. Not one thing, not even gently.
- Afterward, write down one thing they said that is true, and that you could affirm honestly and without strategy. If you cannot find one, that is a finding too; bring it back.
- Optional, and worth it: spend twenty minutes with something they love. A show, a podcast, a book, a band. Paul knew their poetry.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord God, you are not far from any one of us, and you set the times and the boundaries so that people would reach out and find you. Forgive us for the times we have been provoked and let it show. Give us eyes to see the altars in the places we walk through every day, and courage to name the God whom people are worshiping without knowing. And when they laugh, send us back into the same room. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY

"That they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us."

Acts 17:27

SESSION 5 | PART THREE

Leader Reference Card

To an Unknown God

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

Passage	Where and why
Acts 17:16-34	Primary text, read aloud in full at the start.
Acts 18:1	Build 8. Paul leaves Athens for Corinth.
1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5	Build 8, the objection at full strength and the answer. Read 2:1-2 in its context.
Wisdom 13:1-9	Live discovery. The older Jewish argument with the pagans, including the sympathetic "perhaps."
Isaiah 44:9-20	Old Testament Roots. The idol maker who burns half the tree.
Psalms 115:4-8	Old Testament Roots. Idols with mouths that do not speak.
Psalms 135:15-18	Old Testament Roots. Those who make them become like them.
Deuteronomy 32:8	Old Testament Roots. The Most High fixing the bounds of the peoples, behind Acts 17:26.
Acts 2:41	Build 7. The three thousand, for the comparison the group will make anyway.