



way  
of  
life

**P**eter and Paul absorbed the reality of God that comes from our salvation in Jesus Christ. They worked to translate that reality to the world in a number of powerful sermons in the book of Acts. Through our series, **Way of Life**, we'll be looking at these powerful sermons and how they call us to action. Early Christians were known as "People of the Way," as though they were fighting for a new way of life. They were advocating for a way of life, but that way of life is Jesus Himself. Presenting Jesus as Savior and Lord competes with the alternative ways of life presented in culture. By digging into these sermons in Acts, we will see how the way of Jesus is better than any alternative offered by the world.

## THE GOD WE KNOW • Acts 17:16-31 • Richard Haney • October 2, 2016

When our first child was born (1977), we were undecided on her name. We had lots of boy names but could not quite agree on a girl's name. This was before cell phones; so this dad had to find and use a pay phone armed with quarters. I refused to spend quarters and call family and friends without a name to disclose. Finally, my pressure and our shared motivation to tell the world we had a baby pushed us into choosing to call our precious bundle of joy, "*Leah Christine*." Now 39 years later, she is a wife and a mom living in East Asia and she too has had the joy and responsibility of naming her children. It's a time-honored practice. A long time ago, the biblical Adam had that primal responsibility and the work goes on... Names and Naming!

What is in a name? *A rose by any other name would still smell as sweet* – so said Shakespeare. Is it true? Or, do names matter? Should the name and the object match? Is there power in a name? The Harry Potter stories indicated as much when the villain in those tales was identified as "*he who must not be named*" – but Harry, eschewing superstition, said otherwise – Tom Riddle or *Voldemort* he called him.

According to the New Testament, the early church apostles told Jews and then Gentiles about the power in a slain prophet's name. Peter says, "*there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Paul declares, "*at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that...*" (Philippians 2:10). There's something about that name...

In the Book of Acts, Peter is the chief apostle in the first half and Paul in the second half. Acts 15, the story of the Council at Jerusalem, is the midpoint – and at that gathering, James and the church leaders affirmed that Gentiles could become followers of Christ without having to become Jewish. It was a huge decision. It opened the door to the ministry of translating a Jewish messiah for first a Gentile audience and today for all peoples everywhere.

In Acts, the story continued with Paul traveling and preaching – perhaps with new boldness and zeal.

In Acts 16 and 17, we find Paul on the road again. Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and finally Athens. In Philippi there is no synagogue but he finds God-fearers at the river. In Thessalonica, some respond but a large group of Jews run Paul out of town. In Berea, quite a few seriously engage in studying the Old Testament scriptures, but the Thessalonian Jews come after him again (from 50 miles away). The brothers put him on a ship and 300 miles later he takes a breather in Athens. He decides to rest a bit and to be a tourist, right?

Well, not exactly. Paul cannot help preaching and debating wherever he finds himself – but notice how he adjusts his rhetorical style and ministry strategy depending on – the new context.

The encounters in Acts 17 take place in Athens. This is the Athens of *philosophy*: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The Athens of classical *architecture*: the Acropolis featuring the magnificent Parthenon and other buildings. Even in Paul's day when Rome had eclipsed Athens for power, Athens still had the edge in cosmopolitan prestige. Intellectually impressive but spiritually impoverished. Paul visited the synagogue, the marketplace and gave a speech at the *Areopagus* on Mars Hill. Paul encountered Athens in three dimensions.

1. What Paul experienced: He saw:  
a city full of idols

AND Paul felt: greatly distressed

Paul was a Jewish Christian steeped in the commandments and the holiness of God. God had no rivals – there are no other gods! Period! Idols are god-substitutes without power. Yet *idols* may attract the insidious power and presence of *demons*

2. What Paul did: he walked the streets and met the local people. He talked and debated with Athenians in the synagogue

and the marketplace. He met with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. He gave a speech or sermon about the "unknown God."

He described the One True God using basic theology and referring to God's attributes... and deeds. And Paul referred to a man whom God raised from the dead. Paul almost certainly said more than Luke narrates – maybe He said God is great and good and wise and compassionate. You know the OT signature phrase for God? "*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*" (Psalm 103:8 et al).

We do the same, that is, we describe people using attributes and terms of endearment. I call my wife 'dear', cutie pie, sweet heart and more. I called all my girls special nicknames. Leah was La, Charlotte is Char and Emily is Em. We often have special names for the special people in our lives – yes?

But God-talk is different right?

Yes and no. The commandments bid us to reverence God and His name. Do not to take the Lord's name in vain. We respect God's holiness.

But the history of the church is the history of translation. Even in the New Testament, Jesus is named by many names that describe His nature and His ministry. Jesus entered human history and took on human flesh. And He can be received by any and every culture and language in the names of that local language and culture. It does not demean Him nor diminish Him to be translated.

In the New Testament He is first called *Rabbi*. Then He is hailed as *messiah* (anointed) or *Christ*; John calls him *Logos* or *Word*, Son of Man plus we read He is the Son of

Man and the Son of God. Paul tells the Philippians He has the name above all names: Jesus Christ is Lord.

3. What Paul said to the Athenians!
  - a. God is Creator
  - b. God is Sustainer of life
  - c. God is ruler of all nations
  - d. God is Father of human beings (creatures not adopted children)
  - e. God is Judge of the world

Paul also declares that God commands people to repent and He has raised a man from the dead! That resurrection comment stirs the crowd. There evidently were mixed results: some belief, some further interest, and some scoffing and sneering! And some good results: *Dionysius* the Areopagite, a woman named *Damaris*, and some others. Luke the reporter and historian is right on top of the story. He names names and records what happened.

### Paul's Challenge To Us

So what do we see and hear from this story? On this World Communion Sunday, it is good to reflect how the Christian faith is a universal faith. And it is a majority non-western faith. Yes, there are more Christians in the global South than in the west. Praise God that there are churches and Christians in almost all regions of the world, in almost all countries of the world – but not among all people groups of the world. There is work to be done. There is mission to embrace with our prayers and our gifts!

Maybe 5000 people groups to go. About 2.5 billion people who still have little or no access to the Good News. They will not hear about a man God raised from the dead unless someone outside their tribe or people-group crosses a boundary to tell them.

Paul challenges us today about our motives... about our faith and mission motives. Paul obviously had:

Zeal for God's name and honor. A motive for missions.

*Obedience:* Great Commission

*Compassion* for the lost (need access)

*Joy overflows* (contagious witness)

Desire to see the *Fullness* of Christ

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## STUDY GUIDE

### "The God We Know" • Acts 17:16-31

#### Start It

- John Calvin famously wrote that our "minds are factories for idols." What is idolatry and why is it so important to root out?

#### Study It

- Read Acts 17:16-31.
- Athens is still famous for its temples. When we study the Greek gods, we think of Athens and Mt. Olympus far to its north. By the time Paul entered Athens, the Greek and Roman gods were only the beginning of the pantheon of foreign gods and idols worshipped and revered. Collect your idols like a boy collects baseball cards! But Paul caught the seriousness of it. If we are expecting a return from our sacrifice to an idol, we are losing out.
- Paul is commended in his speech for reaching out to the people where they were. How did Paul reach out to the people and understand their condition? How did he move them forward toward Jesus?
- In every part of the world, even where people have developed a culture very remote and isolated, people are religious. They worship or sacrifice to some god or deity or highest principle. Why is this a part of human nature?
- Paul understands where the people are, but is not satisfied with it. He moves and persuades them to think about Jesus Christ. Wherever someone is from and whatever their background, do you believe they need Jesus? Do you believe they would be better off to know and follow Jesus? What have you done to persuade someone to trust in Jesus Christ?

#### Pray It

*Lord of All, You are God and there is no other. Help me to see the emptiness and bankruptcy of the things I idolize above You. Help me to walk away from all loyalties deeper than my loyalty to You. Help me to put You first in all things, knowing that I can only treat the other things well when I see them in proper perspective. Show me Your glory, and let the shine of other 'gods' fade away. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

#### Live It

Think about one person you would like to persuade to know Jesus. Imagine what it would be like to have the courage to open up a conversation. Pray for the opportunity.