

Oct 18, 2026 Leader's Guide

Acts 17:16-34 "A Faith Too Big to Keep Private"

1. Where do you notice the strongest pressure to keep faith private or separate from ordinary life—work, money, politics, relationships, or something else?

Western culture learned important lessons from religious coercion: governments should not compel belief, churches are accountable, and neighbours of different beliefs deserve equal freedom. Yet alongside those lessons grew the assumption that faith belongs in a private compartment. We may ask Jesus for comfort at work without asking what work is for; seek relief from money worries without letting him question our financial ambitions; or pray about politics without allowing him to challenge our own side. The dinner-table story illustrates how easily we speak of God's sustaining presence in church but edit him out with neighbours. Encourage specific, everyday examples rather than abstract complaints about secular society.

Read Acts 17:16–34 together.

2. What does Paul notice in Athens, and what does he do in response? What stands out about where he chooses to engage people?

Paul is in Athens unexpectedly, waiting after being sent away for his safety. Rather than simply sightseeing, he pays attention to a city crowded—almost smothered—with idols (v. 16). His response is to reason in the synagogue and the agora (v. 17), and to engage philosophers (v. 18). The agora was not only a place to buy and sell: it was a hub for news, art, business, learning, and public debate. His faith belongs in the centre of civic and cultural life, not merely in religious gatherings. Invite the group to identify the places where people exchange ideas and shape culture today.

3. The sermon suggests that we need to “see as Paul sees.” What might Paul have recognized beneath the idols of Athens? What are some modern-day things we can turn into ultimate sources of meaning, security, or identity?

Paul does more than register the presence of statues; he considers what the city's worship reveals about its hopes, fears, and allegiances. The same dynamics can operate without temples.

Money promises security and demands sacrifices; erotic desire can become an ultimate authority over fidelity and responsibility; power and conflict can shape how nations and individuals deal with opponents. The point is not that money, desire, or influence are inherently evil, but that good things become destructive when treated as ultimate. Ask what people are seeking through these idols—and what they may lose in the pursuit.

4. Verse 16 says Paul was deeply distressed or provoked. How is that different from contempt, superiority, or withdrawal? What might it look like to hold grief over idolatry together with love for people?

*The word used of Paul's reaction, *paroxynō*, conveys a strong disturbance. The sermon holds together anger at the dishonouring of God and grief for people harmed by false worship. Think of a parent distressed by a child's dishonesty: there can be real anger and real concern for the child's flourishing at the same time. Our responses to cultural idolatry can instead be self-focused—superiority, disgust, resignation, or relief that we are different. Paul's love for God's glory and for the people before him moves him toward them, not away. Invite participants to name the emotions they actually feel, without shaming them.*

5. How does Paul speak to the Athenians about God? Where does he find points of contact, and where does he challenge their assumptions?

Paul notices the altar to an unknown god (v. 23) and uses it as an opening rather than starting with a denunciation. He sees in their searching an awareness that there may be more to reality than they know. He speaks of the Creator who gives life and breath, who is not dependent on human service or confined to handmade shrines (vv. 24–25). He even draws on their own poets (v. 28), affirming traces of truth while challenging the idea that God can be represented by gold, silver, or stone (v. 29). The Athenians' religion could be driven by fear of offending the gods; Paul describes the God who freely gives. Attentiveness and common ground serve truthful witness rather than replacing it.

6. Think of someone whose beliefs about Christianity differ from yours. What questions could help you understand their experience before you offer a response?

Many people who call themselves post-Christian are rejecting an image of God or an experience of church that deserves careful

hearing. Questions such as 'What kind of God have you walked away from?' or 'What about Christianity did you find impossible to believe?' can reveal misunderstandings, genuine wounds, and moral longings. Someone may reject a Christianity that seems indifferent to justice, poverty, or suffering; those concerns can become points of connection with the Jesus who cares deeply about them. Encourage the group to practise curiosity and listen for 'threads of grace' without pretending every criticism is mistaken or every difference is trivial.

7. What does Paul announce about repentance, judgment, and Jesus' resurrection? How does this expand the gospel beyond private comfort or the hope of life after death?

Paul does not end with an interesting exchange of ideas. God commands repentance, has appointed a day of just judgment, and has given assurance by raising Jesus from the dead (vv. 30–31). The resurrection is more than evidence of life after death: it announces that the old order of sin, death, and idolatry has been confronted and that God has begun making creation new. Forgiveness, personal relationship with God, and eternal hope are glorious truths, but not the whole scope of the good news. It reaches relationships, work, economics, politics, art, justice, and care for the vulnerable. Notice the mixed responses in vv. 32–34: some mock, some want to hear more, and some believe.

8. If the risen Jesus claims every part of life, what is one particular area in which you sense an invitation to think, choose, or act differently this week? How could this group pray for and encourage you?

The claim of the risen Jesus extends to every square inch of creation. An integrated faith does not merely help us feel better while awaiting heaven; it reshapes the way we live now as signs of God's coming kingdom. Help each person move from general aspiration to one modest, concrete action: an honest conversation, a different use of money, a changed workplace priority, an encounter with someone they disagree with, or a practical act of care. Invite prayer for eyes to see, hearts that grieve and love, and courage to act; consider checking in next time.

Close by praying for one another: that God would give us eyes to see, hearts that love, and courage to live as signs of his coming kingdom.