

Small Group Guide

WEAVING THE GOSPEL INTO THE FABRIC OF HUMANISM

The Church at Brook Hills

Dr. Jim Shaddix

March 24, 2013

Acts 17:16-34

This guide is a tool to help you lead your group into spiritual transformation. Use it as a resource to train your group into potential disciple-makers and lead your group in discovering, owning, and applying the truths of God's Word. There may be aspects you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on an aspect of their relationship with God. Your role is to help facilitate this encounter with God in His Word with His Body, not just to complete the guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid group task list.

Relate . . .

Begin your group time by engaging in relational conversations and prayer that may include the following elements:

***Welcome**—a simple, brief time to greet one another (especially new friends), enjoy refreshments, and make announcements.*

***Review**—a time to review the truths discussed last week and report on how members have had success or frustrations in applying those truths during the week. (The leader will want to provide encouragement and shepherding during this time.) Periodically, the leader will also want to review the gospel and allow members to share reports about opportunities they've had to share the gospel. Occasionally, the leader will want to review the vision for the group and discuss ways to accomplish that vision better.*

***Prayer**—a time of general prayer with the whole group praying for struggles regarding the application of truths, for those with whom the group is sharing the gospel, and for understanding of today's truths.*

Reflect . . .

Use the following summary and questions to review this week's message and reflect on its implications for our lives. (As a training tool, leaders might want to have various members summarize the teachings in their own words each week sharing how they think the Scripture applied to the original hearers and how the principles apply to us today.)

Message Outline

"Weaving the Gospel into the Fabric of Humanism"

Acts 17:16-34

Recognizing the nature of humanism

***Humanism** – a group of philosophies and ethical views that emphasize the value and agency of human beings. Humanists generally elevate reasoning and experience over established doctrine or faith.*

- Embracing and exalting man-made gods—idolatry (16,23-24,29)
- Embracing and exalting many gods—polytheism (16,18,22-23)
- Embracing and exalting the mind as god—intellectualism (18-21,32)
- Embracing and exalting pleasure as god—hedonism (16,18,22-23)
- Embracing and exalting everything as god—pantheism (16,18,22-23)

Engaging the culture of humanism

- Be jealous for the glory of God. (16; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:15; 10:18; Philippians 2:9-11)

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- Be zealous for the souls of men. (17)

Sewing into the fabric of humanism

- Sew gospel threads along with common threads. (22-23,28)
- Sew gospel threads without referencing the Bible. (24-31)
 - The character of God (24-31)
 - The sinfulness of man (27,30-31)
 - The sufficiency of Christ (31)
 - The necessity of faith (30-31)
 - The urgency of eternity (26,31)
- Sew gospel threads through the big story of Bible. (24-31)
 - God is the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.
 - God created us to live in relationship with him.
 - We rebelled by replacing God with gods we made.
 - God is patient, but now he demands repentance.
 - God has appointed a day to demand an account.
 - God's standard of righteousness is the risen Lord.

Analyzing the response of humanism

- The gospel is a stumbling block to those who have confidence in their flesh. (32; cf. Matthew 7:13-14; Romans 9:33; 1 Corinthians 1:22-23)
- The gospel is the saving power of God to those who place their faith in Christ. (33-34; cf. Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18,24)

Digging Deeper

Remember to encourage those in your small group to invite unbelieving friends with them to church next Sunday as we celebrate Easter. Easter Worship Gatherings will be shorter, and Pastor David's sermon will be intentionally evangelistic. We have services at 8:00 am, 9:30 am, 11:00 am, and 6:00 pm. Lead your small group to pray over the next week for those who will attend the Easter Worship Gatherings.

The people Paul encounters in Athens represent different ideas and beliefs within humanism, which is a group of philosophies and ethical views that emphasize the value and agency of human beings both collectively and individually. Humanists generally elevate reason and experience over established doctrine. Much of Western culture is heavily influenced by this philosophy, and it is likely that people in your small group are influenced by a humanist worldview and not even be consciously aware of it. With your small group, think about where this influence is most evident in our own culture. Lead your group to identify how humanist ideas have influenced their own lives, our culture, and even our church culture. In what ways is our contemporary culture like the traditions Paul experienced in Athens? Help them to see the difference between a humanist worldview and a Christian worldview. Do the people in your small group actively pray for cultural renewal? What would cultural renewal even look like for us in America? Take some time to pray for our culture and our country. Pray that we would be convicted of thoughts, ideas, and beliefs that are contrary to God's Word.

"Well, I was raised Baptist, and my wife is Catholic. Although now in my office at home, I have a statue of Jesus, a statue of Buddha, and another one of Ganesh. I just pick one and pray depending on my mood."

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This was a response of a student in a graduate level literature seminar at a large public research university to a question asked by our professor. We were reading a certain text that dealt with lots of Judeo-Christian imagery. My professor said that the religious beliefs we held would greatly affect our reading of the text, so if we felt comfortable, she wanted us to go around the room and tell everyone what we believed. The aforementioned response was typical for the group. One student claimed to be a “Christian/Buddhist” a few others were professed atheists. One young woman said she believed “there is truth in all religions and saying one is right is simply ignorant.” A few others admitted that they grew up in church, so “they guess that made them Christians.” There were a multitude of religious beliefs all held in equal worth and esteem. I was the last person to talk, and in a room of thirty graduate students, I was the only person who professed Christ in a life-changing way.

Though I did not use this opportunity like Paul to proclaim the gospel to a large group of people, I was able to use what I heard that day to have one-on-one gospel conversations with several members of the class throughout the rest of my time in school. Many even approached me wanting to know what I believed about Jesus! So far as I know, none have come to saving faith, but God granted them the opportunity to hear the truth. Listening to them helped me to know which ones were open to speak about spiritual things.

All of the students in the story above are worldview humanist. Humanistic ideas and values have completely penetrated the way we all think and believe. When talking with your small group this week, remind them that humanism is a pervasive, encompassing worldview rather than a single religion or tradition. The humanistic thoughts of the college students changed from person to person. Humanism will not look the same every time we encounter it. Pastor Jim noted several ways in Acts 17 that humanist ideas present themselves. Spend sometime reviewing these as a group. Try to identify some modern examples of each of these.

- **Idolatry** – Embracing and exalting **man-made** gods.
- **Polytheism** – Embracing and exalting **many** gods.
- **Intellectualism** – Embracing and exalting the **mind** as god.
- **Hedonism** – Embracing and exalting **pleasure** as god.
- **Pantheism** – Embracing and exalting **everything** as god.

In what ways is each belief incompatible with the threads of the gospel? As the members of your small group have been weaving threads, have they encountered any people who believe or hold to these ideologies? Ask a few people to share their experience. Brainstorm with the group how we can weave gospel threads into our conversations with those who embrace each of these streams of humanism. What types of questions can we ask to determine if a person falls into one or more of these categories? How can we move our conversations with these people from the temporal to the eternal?

Some people in your group may feel intimidated or uncomfortable sharing the gospel with people like those who Paul ministers to in Acts 17. What are common objections people may have to sharing with these individuals? Graciously remind the group that the Great Commission is a command to share the gospel with *all* people. How can you encourage each other to share the gospel with a variety of people? Is there any one in your group who is particularly gifted or called to share the gospel to people with humanist beliefs? Or is there anyone who has experience responding to common intellectual objections to Christianity? If there are those among you who feel comfortable sharing the gospel with humanists, how could they come along side others in the group who are less comfortable?

As we seek to share the gospel with a humanistic culture, discuss Paul’s example in Acts 17. Take notice of how the Apostle Paul met and shared with multiple individuals from humanistic traditions. Luke shows how Paul engaged the culture of humanism and sewed gospel threads with many people.

- **Paul was jealous for the glory of God.** This should be our motivation for sharing the gospel. What does it mean to be jealous for God’s glory? Do all of the small group members have a passion for

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making God known? God desires His glory and worth be known by all people (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 2:4). This passion is not something we can manufacture ourselves. We must be utterly dependant on God. What does it reveal about our belief in God if we do not take the time to share the gospel with others? Pray that everyone in your group would be passionate about making God known among all people.

- **Paul was zealous for the souls of men.** Paul shared the gospel with the realization that God will judge the world (Acts 17:30-31). When we share the gospel, the eternity of the people whom we are sharing with hangs in the balance. If we do not actively share the gospel with those around us, what does that reveal about our confidence in the gospel? Paul did not wait for people to approach him. Much like Jesus in John 4, Paul sought people regularly to speak the gospel to them. Continue to encourage those in your small group to take the initiative to be where lost people are. Paul was so zealous for the souls of men that he even wished that he might be cut off from Christ that others may be saved (Romans 9:1-3). Help your small group to see the gravity of this. Pray that the Holy Spirit would give you an awareness of those who need to hear the gospel and an increasing conviction to share it with others.
- **Paul identified common threads.** Paul did not talk down to the humanist. While it is obvious he disagreed with them, he never criticized them. To the contrary, he showed them more respect than they were willing to show him (Acts 17:18). He recognized common threads within their poetry and philosophy (Acts 17:28). Sew gospel threads along with common threads such as:
 - **Spiritual Interest** – The people of Athens were notably religious and interested in spiritual things, and Paul capitalized on this as he interacted with the Athenians. For us, this could be as simple as asking someone if they have any spiritual beliefs and, based on their response, following up with more questions about what they believe and why.
 - **Theological Ignorance** – When Paul saw the altar to the unknown god, he used this display of their ignorance to discuss the One True God with them. Humanists do not have all the answers, and while you may encounter intellectual humanists, they are ignorant of God because they are not in relationship with Him. Therefore, tell them about the God you *know*.
 - **Cultural Identification** – While Paul did not endorse the ideologies of Epimenides or Aratus whom he quotes in verse 28, he knew the culture of the people and used culture to talk to the people about God. How can we use culture (i.e., the arts, literature, movies, etc.) to talk with people about God?
 - Remembering the five types of humanism mentioned above, identify common elements that exist between them and Christianity. How can you use the fabric of culture and experience to begin weaving gospel threads? Has anyone done this in the last few weeks? Ask your small group to consider the people they have placed on their lists. What natural connections can we use to start having spiritual conversations? Pray that God would allow us to use these connections of the next week.
- **Paul did not reference the Bible.** This may seem counterintuitive to us at first, but many people with a humanist worldview often deny or have no knowledge of the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Imagine if a Muslim tried to convince you of the truth of Islam by using the Qur'an. We do not believe in the authority of the Qur'an, so arguments based upon it would not be convincing. This is how many humanists view the Bible. However, this does not mean that we do not speak Scriptural truth. Consider the verses from the previous weeks associated with each thread of the gospel. How would you express the truth of these verses without directly referencing the Bible? Paul did not compromise the truth of the gospel; rather, he presented it in a way that his hearers would understand.
- **Paul presented the gospel by giving the big picture of the Bible's storyline.** Instead of sharing the gospel by systematically quoting Scripture, Paul hits the high points of the big story that the Bible tells. While some people may not be willing to let us run through many verses of Scripture, most people are willing to listen to a story. How well do the members of your small group know the big picture story of Scripture? How would you sum up the storyline of the Bible? Lead them to think about how to share the gospel in this way. What "high points" would you hit? If someone has experience in doing this, ask them to share with the group. A helpful resource in understanding the storyline of Scripture is Graeme Goldsworthy's book *According to Plan*.

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Message Summary

While last week's sermon highlighted how Jesus shared the gospel with a cultural believer, this week's sermon illustrates how Paul engaged the humanistic people of Athens in Acts 17. Paul's audience in Athens represented different strands within the philosophical worldview of humanism, and Western society today is greatly influenced by humanistic ideas and beliefs. Paul recognized the great number of idols in Athens, and out of jealousy for God's glory and a genuine care for the souls of men, he spoke the gospel. He sewed gospel threads by identifying common threads with the culture, by sharing gospel truth without explicitly referencing the Bible, and by focusing on the big picture of the Bible's story. By doing this, Paul was able to speak the whole gospel to the crowds at the Areopagus.

Group Discussion

Use the following questions to help review the application of God's Word to our Head (What does God want me to know?), to our Heart (What does God want me to desire/value?), and to our Hands (What does God want me to do?).

- In Acts 17, Paul confronts the culture of his day. Though the Bible does not explicitly address every specific issue of our time (i.e., drug culture, abortion, etc.), how does the Bible speak to our culture? How does the truth of Scripture apply to situations that are not specifically mentioned in Scripture?
- Humanism is a worldview that is rooted in the self-sufficiency and ingenuity of men. How is this different from a Christian worldview? What types of ideas and beliefs are reflective of a humanist worldview?
- We often think about idols as physical objects of worship like the ones Paul encountered in Athens. What do the idols of our culture look like?
- What is polytheism? Pastor Jim said the worship of many gods is actually the worship of no gods. Why is this true?
- Read Acts 17:18. The people in Athens believed that Paul was a "seed-picker" who put together many different ideas and opinions and claimed that they were true. How would you respond to someone who believed this about Christianity?
- When sewing gospel threads, why is our motivation more important than our methodology?
- What does it mean to be jealous for the glory of God? How is it different than human jealousy? How would you explain the jealousy of God to a non-believer?
- How do we nurture a desire to see everything through the lens of the glory of God? What practices have helped you shape this desire? What can you begin to do this week to foster a desire to make God known?
- Read Acts 17:17. Paul responds to the idolatry in Athens with a desire to spread the gospel among the people in Athens. When you visit a new place, do you see it in terms of its uniqueness or its lostness? How could you use traveling to a new place as an opportunity to weave gospel threads? What types of questions could you ask to identify common threads?
- As Paul is sharing in the Areopagus he never explicitly mentions Scripture, but he shares the whole gospel. Why would he do this? Would Paul's approach be helpful in sharing with certain people you are praying for? How could you use this approach to share the gospel?
- Paul utilized the big picture of Scripture to weave gospel threads. What are the high points of the Bible's storyline that you would share in a spiritual conversation? How would you explain this storyline to a child? To a neighbor? To someone who has little knowledge of the Bible or Christianity. Where would you start? How would you conclude? What would you share in between that beginning and end?
- Read Acts 17: 32-34. What is the response of the crowd in Athens? How is the second response in verse 32 still a rejection of the gospel?
- Are there people in your life who are embracing a humanist worldview? How can you begin to share the gospel with these individuals? Pray that God would use you to share the truth of His word with these people.

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Respond . . .

Encourage your group to break out into smaller, same-gender groups where they will respond to the truths of today's study. These groups will share with one another based on the following questions and then close in prayer:

- What are some of the main truths that God wants you to know from this study?
- How do your thoughts need to adjust to align with these truths?
- According to the truths from this study, what does God want you to desire/value?
- How do your values need to change to align with His values?
- What actions does God want you to take according to the truths of this study?
- What is an action that you can start to implement today or tomorrow?
- What is going to be the most difficult aspect of this study to personally apply?

Close this time by praying for each other, specifically for strength to apply these truths, for personal needs, for the lost people with whom you are seeking to share the gospel, and for our weekly prayer focus as a church.

Weekly Prayer Focus ... (from our worship guide)

- *Church: Praise God for the truth of the gospel and the people in your life He used to reveal to you the gospel and call you to repentance and faith. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide understanding of Paul's presentation to the Areopagus in Acts 17, specifically to recognize how he modeled weaving gospel thread into conversation with unbelievers. Pray for those around you who do not know Christ. Ask God to grant you opportunities to share the gospel with them. Pray for God to help you maximize opportunities to saturate common conversations with the gospel.*
- *Local: This week we are praying for all in our city during this Easter season. Many Brook Hills members are inviting their international friend to join us for one of our Easter Worship Gatherings. We are also praying for Christ City Church and David Nasser, Pastor.*
- *Global: This week we are praying for Brook Hills Long-Termers the Mayotte family, serving in South Africa. Steve and Daria Mayotte serve the juveniles incarcerated at Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town, South Africa. There they work with Hope Prison Ministry providing support to prison inmates, communities, and the Department of Correctional Services through Bible-based disciple-making programs. Join us this week as we pray for Steve, Daria, and their two boys Ethan and Jude.*