"Making the unknown God known" – Discussion Questions on Acts 17v16-34

Feel free to choose the questions that you feel are most interesting or relevant for your group – there is no need to go through them all! At the beginning of this passage Paul is alone in Athens as he waits for Timothy and Silas to join him. The main focus of the passage is on the speech that Paul gives in v22-31 before an educated Gentile audience at the Areopagus. The Epicureans and Stoics were both philosophical schools – the Epicureans believed that the gods were remote and so they could basically live how they liked; the Stoics believed in fate and so sought to act in accordance with nature and so emphasised discipline, duty and hard work. There are a number of ways that this passage can legitimately be used – in the questions below I am using Paul as a model for how we might engage with those who have little or no Christian background.

Read Acts 17v16-34

1. What do you think the term "post-Christian" means when applied to cultures like the UK? What are the implications of this for our evangelism?

2. Looking at v16, how does the fact that Paul was "greatly distressed" when he saw the idolatry of the Athenians challenge our own attitude to the world around us?

3. Why is it helpful to remember that the world around us is not a secular world with no god, but is actually a very religious world which is worshipping false gods? What difference does this make?

4. How does the fact that Paul talks to different kinds of people in this passage and experiences misunderstanding help us to calibrate our expectations of what evangelism in a post-Christian world looks like? What are the most common types of misunderstanding that we are likely to encounter?

5. Thinking about the way that Paul was able to use the altar "to an unknown god" as a way in to present the Christian worldview to those with no Christian background, can you think of any similar "chinks in the armour" of our own culture that reveal that they are actually religious and have need of God?

6. How does Paul seek to develop his argument in v24-31? What lessons for our evangelism can we learn from this? How does he both confront the Athenians about their idolatry but also present God as a far superior alternative?

7. For some people, thinking about "ways in" to a culture for the gospel, or about how to move someone's thinking forwards, sounds daunting. How might you advise someone who is thinking like this? How might being part of a whole church help? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the type of ministry that Paul is involved with in these verses?

8. Is there one thing can you apply to yourself from this passage to help you in your witness for Christ this week?