

# World Religions

*Better understanding our neighbors and their beliefs*

Week Two: Is Pluralism a Pathway to Peace?

Acts 17:16-34

**Series overview:** As we get to know our neighbors, many of us are met with a rich collection of people from cultures worldwide. With so many religions and backgrounds represented in our community, you may find yourself wondering more about the people who surround you. What do they believe? How do I relate to people coming from experiences far different from mine? And most of all, how do I interact with my neighbors in a way that shows love and respect?

**This week's message:** "All paths lead to the same place." "All religions teach the same things at their core." "No one religion has an exclusive claim to truth." "The only wrong belief is to believe some else's beliefs are wrong." These quotes are examples of religious pluralism – the belief that every religion is true; that each provides a genuine encounter with the ultimate. But is religious pluralism truly possible and necessary for people to get along?

- Religions do *not* believe the same thing. They all disagree on the essences of reality – including who God is, life after death, how we relate to others, influences on every day practices, etc. – while holding to exclusive claims.
- Religion's truth claims *can* be evaluated as both true and good for human thriving. We have the capacity to evaluate religions by asking questions like – Does it correspond to reality? Does it have historical viability? Is it consistent or does it contradict itself? Does it favor a group at the expense or exploitation of another? Is it self-critiquing?
- People *can* maintain their religious differences and still live and work together, unless their religion demands the opposite. In which case, we should encourage people to reevaluate their worldview.

Religious pluralism is built on an ideal that tries to impose itself over reality, creating more dissonance. In Acts 17, Paul encounters an array of various ideologies in Athens, Greece – the crossroads where all religious ideologies met – where he is invited to explain his exclusive claims about Jesus. Paul poses truth claims and calls the people to reevaluate what they believe. In response, some are not interested, some want to continue dialoguing, and some choose to believe.

## Small Group Discussion:

### ➤ Connect

- How and where have you experienced religious pluralism? What has your reaction typically been?

### ➤ Grow

- Read Acts 17:16-34.
- Has there ever been a time where you felt 'distressed' or your 'spirit provoked within you' from witnessing the acceptance of many gods? (v. 16) If so, describe that experience and your response.
- What keeps you from being as bold as Paul in discussing spiritual things with others who hold different beliefs? (v. 17-18) What do you usually anticipate the results of that kind of boldness to be?
- If you were called to the city center to explain what you believe, how confident are you that you would know what to say? (v. 19-21) If you feel unsure about how you would articulate your faith, what opportunities will you seek out to help you grow in that area?
- What parts of Paul's speech would you feel uncomfortable saying and why? (v. 22-31)
- How do verses 26-27 relate to you and your neighbors?

### ➤ Reach

- One City. Who from your neighborhood or workplace will you build bridges with this week by engaging in dialogue about truth, reality, and God? How? Pray for them by name as well as for your upcoming conversation.
- One Nation. Pray for our country – that believers and leaders across the U.S. can be bold in calling people to reevaluate religious pluralism as a pathway to peace.
- One World. Which GO Trip will your small group adopt this year so the truth and love of Christ may spread to areas of the world that need and want to start this spiritual dialogue (Acts 17:19-21)? Pray for the trip, encourage fellow small group members to apply to go, and help sponsor those going.

## Prayer Focus

Ask God to help you engage in a dialogue on differences. Ask for help seeing and utilizing opportunities to have bold and loving spiritual conversations with those who do not share your beliefs.

## Scripture Memory

*"For he has set a day when we will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising them from the dead."*

Acts 17:31