



The Scrolls

Helping **CENTRAL BIBLE CHURCH** Families Belong, Become and Go Beyond V28 N34 August 23, 2026

UNHINDERED

“From Idols to the Living God”

Acts 17:16-34

THIS WEEK'S CORE COMPETENCY

Authority of the Bible

I believe the Bible is the word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17



Who or what is your ultimate authority in life?

The Bible is authoritative because it is “inspired by God” (NIV) or “breathed out by God” (ESV) (2Ti 3:16). Note that inspiration pertains to the text, and not to its writers or its readers. Scripture is authoritative because it is literally God’s word, that is, his special revelation.

Peter adds that the inspired text of Scripture was produced by writers who were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2Pe 1:20-21). They were “carried along” in the same way the wind takes a sailing ship along wherever it blows (cf. Ac 27:15). “To be sure, the writers were active in writing, but what they wrote was directed not by their own wills with the possibility of error, but by the Spirit who is true and infallible” (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 79).

Ryrie provides the following carefully worded definition of *inspiration*: “God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings” (*Basic Theology*, 81). And he goes on to elaborate on the significance of various elements in the definition: “(1) The word ‘superintend’ allows for the spectrum of relationships God had with the writers and the variety of material. His superintendence was sometimes very direct and sometime less so, but always it included guarding the writer so that they wrote accurately. (2) The word ‘composed’ shows that the writers were not passive stenographers to whom God dictated the material, but active writers. (3) ‘Without error’ expresses the Bible’s own claim to be truth (John 17:17). (4) Inspiration can only be predicated of the original writings, not to copies or translations, however accurate they may be” (*Basic Theology*, 81-82). In a nutshell, what Scripture says, God says.

Of course, what is written must be interpreted. Rightly understood, it’s meaning is divinely authoritative; misunderstood, the errant

meaning is not. All this implies that the goal of the reader/interpreter of Scripture is to recognize the author’s intended meaning expressed in the words of the text. Some have argued that texts mean what their readers construe them to mean, implying that a single text can have multiple meanings—as many meanings as it has readers or even more, if one reader construes more than one meaning from the text. Or it can have different meanings on different occasional readings. Some have argued that texts mean what they mean apart from their authors or readers, implying that texts may mean something other than their authors intend them to mean or their readers construe them to mean. Given the nature of the biblical text, that is, the fact that it is the inspired word of God, it’s best to define the meaning of the inspired text as the meaning intended by divine/human authorial pair, implying that the goal of interpretation is to recognize that meaning.

Of course, believing all of this and acting rightly on it are two different things. One can agree that the Bible is authoritative and agree that the goal of interpretation is, therefore, to recognize the author’s intended meaning, but rightly recognizing the meaning of Scripture and then neither acknowledging its truth nor obeying its commands aborts the whole process and frustrates Scripture’s ultimate purpose of equipping believers for every good work. And therein lies the practical problem. James understood this when he wrote: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. *Do what it says*. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (1:22-25).

Read Acts 17:16-34

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. 17 So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. 18 Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." 21 Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, 28 for

"In him we live and move and have our being";
as even some of your own poets have said,
"For we are indeed his offspring."

29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of

man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this." 33 So Paul went out from their midst. 34 But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

After reading the text, practice your Observation skills by noting the following:

- Circle "them" in v. 16.
- Circle "provoked" in v. 16.
- Underline "Epicurean" and "Stoic" in v. 18.
- Circle "babbler" in v. 18.
- Circle "foreign divinities" in v. 18.
- Circle "brought" in v. 19.
- Circle "Areopagus" in vv. 19, 22.
- Underline "very religious" in v. 22.
- Circle "unknown god" in v. 23.
- Bracket "allotted periods and the boundaries" in v. 26.
- Circle "perhaps" in v. 27.
- Highlight the quotes in v. 28.
- Bracket "times of ignorance" in v. 30.
- Underline "Dionysius," "Damaris" and "others" in v. 34.

What one word would you use to describe the **TONE** of this passage? (i.e., stern, joyful, cautious, etc.)

What one thing do you not understand in this passage?

Try to summarize the **THEME** of this passage in one word. If you were going to describe these verses, you might say, "This text is about _____."



DIG DEEPER

Answer the questions to help you apply the passage and prepare for discussion

1. Paul had some time on his hands in Athens—*why*? And *how* did he spend it?

2. *What* did he notice as he toured the city? And how *did* he feel about it?

3. Do you think he would feel the same if he toured your city? Explain.

4. Describe how Paul's marketplace hearers, including the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, responded to his speeches.

5. Before refuting their idolatry, Paul opened his speech to the Areopagus saying, "Men of Athens I perceive that in every way you are very religious." What was he up to?

6. In what sense is "the unknown god" the subject of his speech?

7. What inferences does he draw from the fact that "God doesn't live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands"?

8. What inference does he draw from the fact that humans are "God's offspring"?

9. Of *what* does he say all people everywhere should repent, and *why*?

10. **Discussion:** Talk about how Paul's message was received then and how you think a similar message would be received now.

Commentary On The Text

Acts 17:16-34 can be viewed in three parts: the *setting* of Paul's sermon (vv. 16-21); his *sermon* (vv. 22-31); and his hearers' *response* to it (vv. 32-32). Regarding the *setting*, Paul finds himself in Athens after being run out of Berea (17:14-15). In this case, the *geographical* setting of the narrative implies its cultural and religious setting. Here's what commentators have to say about Athens at this time. "Athens, at that time a quiet little city of some 5,000 citizens ("augmented by the nonnative population, particularly the artists, the students, and the tourists" [John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 365]), lived on its great past" (Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 517).

"Although *Athens* had once been the intellectual centre [*sic*] of the ancient world, it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university, but it tended to live on its reputation. When Paul arrived, he was not so much impressed by the culture as irritated by the evidences of idolatry. 'He found himself confronted by a veritable forest of idols', with vast numbers of images of Hermes all over the city and especially at the entrance to the *agora* (RSV *market place*) through which he probably walked" (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC, 283).

"The art of Athens was a reflection of its worship. The intellectual capital of the world was producing idolatry" (Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, 402). Apparently, the apostle had some time on his hands before Silas and Timothy arrived.

While Paul was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to join him, he was "distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (v. 16). People joked that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. It's wholehearted devotion to idolatry both angered Paul and at the same time broke his heart. He could have acted out of anger and simply left the Athenians to their own devices and their ultimate consequences. He could have thrown up his hands in frustration rather than engage his pagan culture. But instead he acted out of a broken heart and "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17). One day he got into a dispute with a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The first were "like agnostic secularists" and the second were "pantheists who argued for the unity of humanity and kinship with the divine" (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, 561). It sounded to them like he was promoting the worship of strange gods, something Socra-

tes had been accused of 450 years earlier. So they brought him before the Areopagus, an important council with authority over religion, morals, and education in the city, and in response to their curiosity, he used an altar to "an unknown god" that he had seen nearby as a segue to tell them about the true God.

Regarding Paul's speech, which begins in verse 22, the apostle confronts the ignorance of the Athenians' idolatry but in a gentle way. In it he points out that idolatry just doesn't make any sense. In the first place, God made the world and everything in it. He doesn't live in handmade temples no matter how majestic they might be. They can't contain him, and by implication he cannot be adequately depicted by the idols they do contain. In fact, the entire creation can't contain him. He's far greater than what he has created. Furthermore, he doesn't need people to look after him like idols do. Idols need people to shape them (see Isa 44:9-20), set them up, take them down, and carry them around (see Isa 46:1, 2). He on the other hand "gives all men life and breath and everything else" (v. 25). He's the one who looks after people. He made the nations, even Greece, out of one man, Adam, and established the times of their rise and fall and ordained their boundaries. That providential care was intended to provoke mankind to reach out to the One who is "not far from each one of us." As the poets have said, "For in him we live and move and have our being," and "We are his offspring." If all of that is true, idolatry must be false. Since we are God's offspring, how can we be so foolish as to believe that "the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design" (v. 29). Such willful ignorance God overlooked in the past but no more. Now that humanity knows better, "he commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30). Judgment is coming; now is the time to turn from idols to the living God.

It all made perfect sense until Paul again mentioned the resurrection. The Greek intelligentsia was so prejudiced against that idea that some sneered at Paul while others more politely withheld judgment. (Greeks and Romans believed in life-after-death, although they had strange views of what it was like. Jews, for the most part, and Christians believed in life *after*, life-after-death. They believed in resurrection, an embodied life following life-after-death.) A few, however, believed. Named among the men and women who believed, were Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and Damaris, a "prominent" (cf. 17:4) woman, as well as "others with them" (v. 34). Thank God for the few that believed.

Word Studies/Notes

v. 16 *them*
(cf. v. 15).

I.e., Silas and Timothy

v. 16 *provoked* Cf. “greatly upset” (GNT, NET); “greatly distressed” (NIV). “As a city full of idols, it arouses Paul to react with inner anger. The verb is only used here and in 1 Cor. 13:5 in the NT. Paul is very disturbed by what he sees” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, 560, 61). “Paul was ‘infuriated’ at the sight. Ancient descriptions testify that the marketplace was virtually lined with idols, particularly the ‘herms,’ the monuments to Hermes with the head of the god on top” (John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 366).

v. 18 *Epicurean, Stoic* “Epicureans were thoroughgoing materialists, believing that everything came from atoms or particles of matter. There was no life beyond this; all that was human returned to matter at death. Though the Epicureans did not deny the existence of gods, they saw them as totally indifferent to humanity. They did not believe in providence of any sort; and if one truly learned from the gods, that person would try to live the same sort of detached and tranquil life as they, as free from pain and passion and superstitious fears as they” (Polhill, 366; cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC, 284).

“The Stoics, founded by Zeno (340-265 BC), took their name from the *stoa* or colonnade where he taught. They stressed the importance of Reason as the principle which was inherent in the structuring of the universe and by which men ought to live. They had a pantheistic conception of God as the world-soul, and their ethics stressed individual self-sufficiency and obedience to the dictates of duty” (Marshall, 284; cf. Bock 561).

v. 18 *babbler* Gk. *spermologos*, “‘seed speaker,’ which evoked images of a bird pecking indiscriminately at seeds in a barnyard. It referred to a dilettante, someone who picked up scraps of ideas here and here and passed them off as profundity with no depth of understanding whatever” (Polhill, 367). “The term has the connotation of a person who picks up bits of information and passes them off as if he knows what he is talking about (Barrett 1998: 830: ‘third rate journalist’)” (Bock, 562).

v. 18 *foreign divinities* Perhaps some “thought Paul was advocating foreign gods, probably mistaking Anastasis (‘resurrection’) for the goddess consort of a god named Jesus” (Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *John-Acts*, vol. 9, EBC, 474). Or “Rather, Paul preaches a new religion with new ideas like resurrection and so in the listeners’ view discusses ‘foreign divinities’” (Bock, 562).

vv. 19, 22 *Areopagus* Two questions are raised by this verse: (1) Was Paul arrested or just brought to the Areopagus? (2) Was he brought to a place or brought before the council that met in that place? The NIV opts for the most likely conclusion that Paul was *brought* before the *council* that met there. “It had great power, trying crimes and regulating, for example, city life, education, philosophical lectures, public morality, and foreign cults (Barrett 1998:832)” (Bock, 562).

v. 23 *very religious* The meaning of the Gk. word is ambiguous. “It could be used in a positive sense for one who was very devoted to religious matters [cf. “extremely religious,” NRSV]. It was also used with a negative connotation for those who were overly scrupulous, even superstitious, in their religious observance [cf. “extremely scrupulous,” NJB; “too superstitious,” KJV]” (Polhill, 371). Paul probably meant it in the good sense; why would he risk alienating his audience at the very outset.

v. 23 *unknown god* “Paul is not equating the god worshiped here by the Greeks and the God he will preach, but the altar is a segue into discussing the one true God” (Bock, 564). There were altars aplenty to “unknown gods” in that day [cf. Marshall, 286], but “Paul scarcely wanted to expound on gods in the plural. This was precisely what he wanted to deny, as he introduced the Athenians to the one true Creator God” (Polhill, 372).

v. 26 *periods . . .* Cf. “times in history and the boundaries of their lands” (NIV). “To what do the ‘times’ (*kairoi*) refer? They could either refer to the seasons or to historical epochs. The same ambiguity exists in the term ‘exact places where they should live.’ Does this refer to the habitable areas of the planet or to the boundaries between nations? If Paul was talking of seasons and habitable zones, he was pointing to God’s providence in nature. If the reference is to historical epochs and national boundaries, the emphasis is on God’s lordship over history” (Polhill, 374). “The context’s emphasis on how God is handling the nations may well favor a choice for national dominance and boundaries” (Bock, 566).

v. 27 *perhaps* Paul “used the optative mood in v. 27, a mode of Greek grammar that here expresses strong doubt . . . There is no question about God’s providence; there is about humanity’s ability to make the proper response” (Polhill, 375).

v. 28 *poets* “These citations suggest a widespread belief that people exist by God’s creation and sustenance, so that God is not far off” (Bock, 568).



APPLY THE TEXT

CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THIS PASSAGE

The gospel message regarding Jesus and his resurrection is unbelievable to people, who first must believe in the One true God and repent of their vain philosophies of life.

CENTRAL MESSAGE FOR YOUR LIFE

(Rewrite the Central Message above to personally apply to your own life)



3 LIVING QUESTIONS

The “Living Questions” are simple questions we may ask of any text in order to apply the Bible to our life. Answer the questions below as personally as you can.

1. What does the author of this passage want me to *know*?
2. What does the author of this passage want me to *do*?
3. What does the author of this passage want me to *be*?



PARENT CONNECTION

Raising Christian kids can feel like swimming upstream. The world is headed one way, but you're trying to guide your family the opposite direction. The world says that anything goes, but you know God has a different standard and an alternative path for you and your family. When Paul noticed the idol worship in Athens, he was deeply grieved. He knew that he had the answer to the problems the Athenians faced in life. He knew that the stone and gold statues standing front and center in their city were just screaming voices that wouldn't be able to solve a thing. He knew the One True God was patiently waiting for them to turn to Him. In a world of competing voices, some loud and pervasive, and honestly, some very appealing, your parenting voice matters. With all the messages of happiness, identity and success being thrown at your child, don't be afraid to calmly steer them in the direction of truth. Remember, God has parented through every generation, and He will help you parent through today's world. As you disciple your kids, there will be days when they (or you) seem distracted or uninterested. Don't lose heart. Every conversation about Jesus, every bedtime prayer, every act of grace, and every moment spent opening God's word is planting seeds. Your job is to obey, to plant the seeds of truth. God will grow these seeds in His perfect timing. Keep pointing your kids to Christ. You can trust God to faithfully draw them to Himself. We're praying for you!

What Does The Bible Say?

Read Acts 17:16-34.

1. Why was Paul's spirit provoked?
2. What did God make from one man?
3. What does God command all people to do?

What Do You Think?

What is something that the culture of the world says is ok, but God doesn't want His people to follow?

What Do You Do?

Notice what people around you believe that doesn't line up with the Bible. Pray for them to know God.

CORE COMPETENCY: Authority of the Bible

I believe the Bible is God's book that tells me what to believe and do.

MEMORY VERSE: Isaiah 26:3

"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."

KidPIX COUPON

Earn 1 KidPIX Token by completing the CENTRAL Kids Bible Study on this page and another token by memorizing and reciting the memory verse for this week.

Questions: kids@wearecentral.org

- ☐ I completed my Bible Study
- ☐ I memorized this week's verse
- ☐ I brought my Bible to church
- ☐ I brought a friend



CHILD'S NAME

GRADE

PARENT SIGNATURE

OUR CORE COMPETENCIES

CENTRAL BELIEFS

Authority of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Church (Ephesians 4:15-16)
I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Eternity (John 14:1-4)
I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

The Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9)
I believe the Holy Spirit convicts, calls, converts and changes me as a child of God.

Humanity (John 3:16)
I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Identity in Christ (John 1:12)
I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-4)
I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became man, died for sinners and rose from the dead.

Life Purpose (Acts 20:24)
I believe I am a steward of God's resources and have been redeemed to participate in His Kingdom purposes for His glory.

Personal God (Psalm 121:1-2)
I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Salvation by Grace (Ephesians 2:8-9)
I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.



CENTRAL VIRTUES

Love (1 John 4:10-12)
I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Joy (John 15:11)
I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace (Philippians 4:6-7)
I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself and others.

Patience (Proverbs 14:29)
I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness (1 Thessalonians 5:15)
I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others

Faithfulness (Proverbs 3:3-4)
I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Gentleness (Philippians 4:5)
I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Self-Control (Titus 2:11-13)
I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Grace (Colossians 3:13)
I demonstrate forgiveness, mercy and generosity to others, even when they have offended me.

Hope (1 Peter 1:3-5)
I have a growing anticipation of God's promises and my secure eternity with Him.

Humility (Philippians 2:3-4)
I choose to esteem others above myself.



CENTRAL PRACTICES

Bible Study (Hebrews 4:12)
I study the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Biblical Community (Acts 2:44-47)
I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Compassion (Psalm 82:3-4)
I seek to serve the last, the least and the lost in my community.

Disciple-Making (2 Timothy 2:2)
I multiply godly beliefs, virtues and practices in others to encourage their spiritual growth in Christ.

Evangelism (Acts 1:8)
I share Jesus with others through personal proclamation and demonstration of the gospel.

Generosity (2 Corinthians 9:6-11)
I gladly give my resources to fulfill God's purposes.

Prayer (Psalm 66:16-20)
I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-Mindedness (Matthew 6:33)
I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts (Romans 12:4-6)
I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Worship (Psalm 95:1-7)
I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Tom Bulick (M.A. in Educational Leadership, Eastern Michigan University, Th.M. in Old Testament, and Ph.D. in Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary). For more than forty years, Tom has served as pastor, faculty member, and administrator. Tom was Vice President for Student Life and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (Vancouver, B.C.) from 1986 to 1998 and Spiritual Formation Pastor at Central Bible Church (Fort Worth, TX) from 1998 to 2022. He and his wife Ruth have one son, Zach.

Stephanie Thomas (B.B.A University of Texas at Arlington). Stephanie is married to James and they have five children: Elijah, Levi, Bo, Ella and Simon. Stephanie has attended Central Bible Church for more than 20 years, has been on staff since 2014, and now serves as Children's Minister.

The Scrolls Bible Study is a spiritual growth resource of Central Bible Church, Fort Worth, Texas.

© 2026 Central Bible Church.

Material researched, written and supervised by Dr. Tom Bulick. All Scripture referenced from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted. This resource is freely distributed and may be copied without permission.



**CENTRAL
BIBLE CHURCH**

8001 Anderson Boulevard
Fort Worth, Texas 76120
817-274-1315
wearecentral.org

OUR MISSION
Making God known by making disciples who are changed by God to change their world.