

Coming Fall 2020

salt&light

Bible Study for Anabaptist Christians

**Joining God:
Relationship and Worship**

faq

WHAT IS SALT & LIGHT?

Salt & Light is a new quarterly Bible study to help you encounter God more deeply through Christ-centered Sunday school lessons. *Salt & Light* succeeds the *Adult Bible Study* curriculum that MennoMedia has published for many years.

Each weekly *Salt & Light* session includes a spiritual practice alongside thought-provoking commentary and discussion prompts. Daily Bible readings, free online essays, reproducible teaching aids, and suggested resources for additional study help participants make connections throughout the week. The new design is simple, attractive, and easy to read, and each weekly session includes the accompanying NRSV Scripture text. *Sal y Luz* is the Spanish-language version.

HOW ARE THE BIBLE OUTLINES DEVELOPED FOR SALT & LIGHT?

Salt & Light Bible outlines are developed by a team of Mennonite and United Methodist Bible scholars and educators who have a passion for creating exciting and transformative Bible studies for adults. This partnership provides complete freedom to align the outlines and resultant Bible studies with our Anabaptist theology and practice. MennoMedia is highly involved in the development of this new curriculum, from the inception of each Bible study session to publication.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE UNIFORM SERIES/INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS?

The work of the Committee on the Uniform Series continues. MennoMedia has chosen to now develop its own outlines apart from this series.

WHY ARE MENNONITES NO LONGER A PART OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE UNIFORM SERIES (CUS)?

When CUS developed the six-year cycle of Bible studies for 2022–28, MennoMedia editors became concerned about the intertextual approach used to develop the outlines. This resulted in themes that are two or three quarters in length with a heavy representation of Old Testament texts and less emphasis on the Gospels. We saw this as an opportunity to work to develop Anabaptist Bible outlines.

WHAT IS GAINED BY DEVELOPING A BIBLE STUDY CURRICULUM “FROM THE GROUND UP”?

By developing our own outlines, we are creating a curriculum that grows from our Anabaptist biblical interpretation and practices.

WILL A LARGE-PRINT EDITION BE AVAILABLE?

Yes, a large-print edition of the participant guide will be offered.

WILL A SPANISH TRANSLATION VERSION BE AVAILABLE?

Yes, *Sal y Luz* will be available as a downloadable, reproducible participant guide and leader guide.

WILL THE SESSION PLANS IN THE LEADER GUIDE HAVE THE PARTICIPANT GUIDE MATERIALS AS AN INSET?

Yes, the layout is similar to the familiar *Adult Bible Study* teacher’s guide.

WILL RELATED ONLINE ARTICLES BE AVAILABLE FROM MENNOMEDIA?

Yes, *Salt & Light* Online will feature articles connecting the Bible studies with current events in the church and the world.

12. How Can We Keep from Singing?

Purpose

To worship God, who created everyone and everything that lives on this earth, and to consider how to share the good news of Jesus.

Background Scripture

Acts 17:16-34

Scripture Text

bold = key verse

Acts 17:16, 22-34 NRSV

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ **The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,** ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though

indeed he is 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 too are his offspring.'

²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged 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 When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³ At that point Paul left them. ³⁴ But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Spiritual Practice

Take your Bible and go outdoors. If you can find a place away from a lot of humanity's noise, that is even better. Pay attention to the details around you:

1. Close your eyes and listen. Just listen.
2. Turn your attention to the smells you notice for several minutes.
3. Open your eyes. Spend 10 minutes simply seeing things.
4. Move around and touch the world around you.
5. Read Psalm 96 or Psalm 104:1-5, 31-34, remembering and connecting with your sensory experience.

Daily Bible Readings

MON	Sing to the Lord a New Song	Psalm 96:1-13
TUE	Worship with Our Whole Being	Psalm 104:1-5, 31-34
WED	Life of Everything in God's Hand	Job 12:1-13
THU	Passing Over Previous Sins	Romans 3:21-26
FRI	Believers at Prayer	Acts 4:23-31
SAT	Preaching About Jesus and the Resurrection	Acts 17:16-21
SUN	God Calls for a Change of Heart	Acts 17:16, 22-34

DEER STANDS

Okay, my hunter-friends-who-sit-in-deer-stands on Sunday morning! This is your verse! When I look down my nose at you because I was in church and you weren't, just smile and say, "Acts 17:24."

When I say the sermon was so good and the singing outstanding, tell me about the birds you heard warbling their predawn songs. Tell me about the raccoon whose bright eyes met yours as you shared the same tree. Tell me about the painted sky as the sun stroked the land to light.

When I say it was good to be with the faith community, tell me about the tree that moved with the wind, sighing and whispering in your ear. Tell me about the family of skunks that scurried below your stand, sporting their tuxedo suits. Tell me about the decaying leaves and the life they support.

When I say it was an uplifting hour of worship in the church, tell me your three hours in the tree stand lifted you too.



DISCOVER

Where is God? You know what comes next. "We need both."

Of course we do. If we were to take just this verse, someone might interpret it to say, "God isn't in our church buildings." That's the danger of taking one verse and building an entire philosophy around it. We need to explore the context around it. We cross the hermeneutical bridge that takes us into that time, place, and culture and see what was going on.

God's salesperson. In this case, Paul is trying to sell the Athenians on the one true God, as manifested in Jesus. Yes, Paul was a traveling salesman. He traveled *a lot*, and wherever he went, he was "selling" the gospel of Jesus Christ. This story finds him in Athens, a center of intellec-

► Paul knew how to talk to different groups of people. Athenians loved learning, and they especially loved to learn about religion. Religious idols were everywhere, and Paul described the residents as "religious . . . in every way" (vv. 16, 22). They even had an altar "to an unknown god" (v. 23)—just to cover their bases.

Seeing all these idols made Paul "deeply distressed" (v. 16). But he didn't stand up at the Areopagus and tell the Athenians how bad they were, how wrong and sinful, how much they were totally on the wrong

path. He knew much better than that. He knew *how* to talk to different groups of people, and he knew how to share “the better way.”

Paul was not a systematic theologian. Though surely a mind of great wit and intelligence, of wisdom and understanding, his primary calling was an evangelist. His task was to spread the good news, and he was comfortable adapting the message to his audience. Above all, he was concerned to be heard and understood.¹

Paul started by complimenting the Athenians for being “extremely religious . . . in every way” (v. 22). He showed them how observant he was. He didn’t just notice statues, he noticed the inscriptions. One of them caught his eye and gave him a perfect segue into what he wanted to say:

“You worship an unknown god? Have I got a deal for you! I *know* that God! . . . I know that God, and that one true God knows you! That God knows everything about everybody on this earth and is just waiting for you to come to him. And it won’t be hard to find him, because this God that I know is right inside each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’” (vv. 24-28, my paraphrase).

Brilliant! Paul uses Greek words from their own poets to support his message!

An unusual approach. Paul grabs their attention not only with compliments and words from their authors but also with the newness and unusualness of his message. Not only does he name the unnamed god, but he says that this is the one and only God. Since we are God’s children, away with all these ridiculous idols and altars.

Repent! Turn around!

Now Paul is going out on a limb. He has moved from being affirming and saying things that fit into the intellectual mindset of his listeners and transitioned to preaching about a man who rose from the dead. This is much riskier because they can’t see God like we can the natural world or idols made of stone, but it’s where Paul has been heading all along. The God who made heaven and earth, who doesn’t live in temples made by humans, calls all humanity to God’s heart, and the death and resurrection of Jesus is the conduit for humanity to receive that call.

That is very new information for the people who love to hear new things. The traveling salesman/God messenger is closing the deal.

1. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Lent Through Eastertide, Year A*, Vol. 2, 472.

And now we cross the hermeneutical bridge and come back to the present.



CONNECT AND TRANSFORM

Be like Paul? We come back to our deer tree stands and our church pews. We come back to all the ways and places we worship God. We come back and say, “Well that was a nice lesson about Paul. He was such an amazing guy, wasn’t he?”

Yes, he was. Paul was a brilliant, long-suffering, creative, inspiring, faithful, “regular guy” who gave his life as a constant witness for the good news of Jesus Christ, no matter where he found himself. He was determined, and yet he adapted to his situation and the culture in which he found himself. Paul did things that none of us will ever do.

So, we can admire him, close the Bible, and move on with our lives. Or not.

Because Paul did a lot we *can* do.

- Paul observed people and their culture. He listened to them. He listened for ways people were seeking and searching for the one true God.
- Paul paid attention to details. He saw the sign on the altar, “To the unknown god.” He looked for openings into people’s hearts and minds.
- Paul respected people’s perspectives *and* invited them to go deeper in their thinking.
- Paul spoke boldly out of his personal experience.
- Paul challenged and invited people to accept the good news of Jesus and worship the one true God.

There’s nothing on that list we can’t do. It might be scary and risky, but there is nothing we can’t do.

¡Si se puede! Yes, we can! We can observe people and cultures. If criticism enters our thoughts, we can replace it with curiosity. We can listen for the empty spaces in people’s lives that Jesus can fill. We can choose to respect people’s perspectives and invite them to think deeper.

How has Jesus changed my life and your life? We can talk about it.

- » What does it mean to be so immersed in the love of Jesus, the power of the Spirit, and the faithfulness of God that we cannot keep from sharing it?

- » What does it mean to be as excited about it as some of our idols, like sports teams?
- » What does it mean to feel our faith so deeply that this question from the old hymn is ours: “How can I keep from singing?”²

2. *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 580.

12. How Can We Keep from Singing?

Preview

Paul, “deeply distressed” at the idolatry in Athens, addressed a group of philosophers in a public forum. He complimented the Athenians on their extreme religiosity and observed that they even had an idol to an unknown god. Paul declared that this “unknown god” was the Lord, Creator of heaven and earth. The Lord created human beings so that we might search for and find him. Since we are made in God’s image, to think we can manufacture an idol that will reflect God’s image is absurd. But God gives everyone an opportunity to repent before the day of judgment.

Purpose

To worship God, who created everyone and everything that lives on this earth, and to consider how to share the good news of Jesus.

Preparation

In Acts 17, Paul was waiting in Athens for his companions, Silas and Timothy. His time in Greece had been tumultuous—riots, public beating, arrest, and imprisonment. When rumors arose of a riot in Beroea, believers sent Paul to the safer location of Athens.

But Paul did not lie low in Athens. Upset by the city’s idolatry, Paul began to engage both Jews and Gentiles in debate, preaching the good news of Jesus. Athenians were curious about this new teaching and brought Paul to the Areopagus, a public forum, to hear more, which is where Paul gave the speech featured in this passage.

Read the entire chapter 17 of Acts. The printed text in *Salt & Light* does not include verses 17-21, but your group will understand the context better if you include these verses as a part of your study. This session has many possible foci. But *S&L* focuses on cross-cultural evangelism—sharing the good news of Jesus in a way that observes and respects the cultures of others. This is what Paul did in Athens.

For the **Discover** section, recruit a narrator to read verses 16-22a and 32-34 and an actor to read Paul’s speech in verses 22b-31. Recruit dramatic readers for both roles or take one of the roles yourself.

Supplies

- whiteboard or newsprint and markers

Background Scripture:

Acts 17:16-34 (NRSV)

Scripture Text:

Acts 17:16, 22-34 NRSV

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²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ **The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,** ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is 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,

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SHARE

Write this chart on the whiteboard or newsprint.

Religious Affiliation in the U.S. & Canada¹

United States	
Protestant	47%
Catholic	21%
Other religions	8%
Unaffiliated "nones"	23%

Canada	
Protestant	27%
Catholic	39%
Other religions	11%
Unaffiliated "nones"	24%

As participants arrive, call their attention to the chart. Explain that "other religions" includes a wide variety of faith traditions, including Orthodox Christian, Mormon, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. Canada has a much higher percentage of Catholics than the U.S. partly because of the large Catholic population in Quebec.

» What do you notice about these statistics?

In both countries, the percentages of Catholics and Protestants have declined dramatically in recent decades. The fastest-growing category by far is unaffiliated, sometimes called the "nones." The "nones" include a wide variety of people from atheists to those who believe in God but don't want to participate in "organized religion." In the U.S., 36 percent of young adults, ages 18–29, are "nones." This now equals the percentage of this age group who are Protestant.

1. "Canada's Changing Religious Landscape," a compilation of statistics from studies by the Pew Research Forum on Religion and Public Life, June 27, 2013.

Spiritual Practice

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Salt & Light Resources

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- » How do you *feel* when you study these statistics—surprised, concerned, angry, sad, confused, nostalgic, challenged, curious?

Note that Paul may have felt all those emotions when he entered the “religious marketplace” known as Athens.

DISCOVER

Before reading Acts 17, share the following background information:

This passage takes place during Paul’s second missionary journey. Since arriving in Greece, Paul had encountered substantial opposition. In Philippi, he and Silas were beaten, arrested, and imprisoned. In Thessalonica a mob incited a riot. When rumors of something similar arose in Beroea, believers sent Paul to Athens to await Silas and Timothy.

The narrator will read Acts 17:16-22a, to the beginning of Paul’s speech. The actor who plays Paul will then stand before the group and perform Paul’s speech in verses 22b-31. At the conclusion of the speech, the narrator will read the remaining verses.

The group may be curious about the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers mentioned in verse 18. Epicureans taught that happiness is the highest good and is to be attained by living a life free from excesses of all kinds . . . [Stoics] taught that there is a great Purpose shaping all nature and human-kind toward good ends. As people conform to this Purpose, they fulfill their destiny.²

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pursuits. Athenians loved learning, and they especially loved to learn about religion. Religious idols were everywhere, and Paul described the residents as “religious . . . in every way” (vv. 16, 22). They even had an altar “to an unknown god” (v. 23)—just to cover their bases.

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Notes

2. Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, 194.

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Choose among the following questions for more discussion.

- » Why do you think Paul began his speech with a compliment? Was it disingenuous to say that the Athenians were “extremely religious . . . in every way”? Why or why not?
- » Paul’s first assertion was that God is Creator of “the world and everything in it.” Why do you think he chose that as his first point?
- » In verse 26, Paul asserts that God “made all nations.” Why was that an important point to make in the ancient world? In today’s world?
- » In verse 27, Paul said that God made the nations “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him.” What did Paul mean by this? What does it mean to “grope for God”?
- » What did Paul mean in verse 28 when he said, “In him we live and move and have our being”? (Note: Paul did not say God lives in us, but that we live in God.)
- » In verse 29, Paul implies that all human beings are God’s children, not just those who believe in Jesus (John 1:12). What do you believe? How would your belief on this point affect how you share the gospel with others?
- » Read verse 30. Is the present day a time when God overlooks human ignorance or a time when God commands everyone to repent?

Notes

CONNECT

Read the bulleted points in *S&L* on page 72. Carol Duerksen stressed that Paul carefully observed the Athenians and their religious culture (see v. 23). He did this even though the idolatry of that culture “deeply distressed” him.

- » Why is it important for Christians to observe carefully the culture and religious practices of others?
- » How does such observation affect our sharing of the good news of Jesus?

Call the group’s attention to the chart on religious affiliation.

- » Do you know any “nones”?
- » What have you observed about their religious beliefs?
- » Are they atheist, agnostic, believers but unaffiliated?
- » Are they “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR)?
- » How might you better observe their beliefs and practices?
- » If you *don’t* know any “nones” (or few of them), why is that?

Paul was quite capable of arguing with those of different religious beliefs (see v. 17).

- » Why do you think he chose not to argue with the Athenians?
- » Which do you think is more effective when it comes to sharing the gospel—argument or the “Athenian approach”?
- » Which is more effective for you?

And now we cross the hermeneutical bridge and come back to the present.



CONNECT AND TRANSFORM

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There’s nothing on that list we can’t do. It might be scary and risky, but there is nothing we can’t do.

¡Si se puede! Yes, we can! We can observe people and cultures. If criticism enters our thoughts, we can replace it with curiosity. We can listen for the empty spaces in people’s lives that Jesus can fill. We can choose to respect people’s perspectives and invite them to think deeper.

How has Jesus changed my life and your life? We can talk about it.

- » What does it mean to be so immersed in the love of Jesus, the power of the Spirit, and the faithfulness of God that we cannot keep from sharing it?

Notes

- » What does it mean to be as excited about it as some of our idols, like sports teams?
- » What does it mean to feel our faith so deeply that this question from the old hymn is ours: “How can I keep from singing?”²

2. *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 580.

One of the most striking statements in this passage is Paul’s assertion that God made human beings so that we might “perhaps grope” for God (v. 27; “reach out” NIV).

- » Have you ever blindly or desperately “reached out for God”? If so, what was that experience like?
- » How could sharing your experience of “reaching out” be an effective way to speak with “nones” about faith in God?

Many “nones” believe in God and have a positive view of Jesus. But they are turned off by Christians and the church.

- » Why do you think this is?
- » What do you think is the best way to reach such people with the good news of Jesus?

TRANSFORM

This week, observe and listen carefully to people who have religious beliefs different from yours. These may be other Christians who believe differently from you, people of another faith, or “nones” of one type or another. Seek to understand them. As Carol Duerksen said, “If criticism enters our thoughts, we can replace it with curiosity” (*S&L*, p. 72).

Consider how you can share your faith in God and Jesus Christ with others. Think, in particular, about how you might share Jesus. Jesus was an amazingly attractive figure in his time and place and remains so today. But for many people, Jesus remains a caricature or an otherworldly figure surrounded by an impenetrable holy aura.

- » How might you share the real Jesus?

Notes