

# 6

# UNSTOPPABLE IMPACT



*What do you enjoy most about  
different cultures?*

**QUESTION #1**

#BSFLunstoppable

## THE POINT

*The gospel of Jesus Christ  
can impact any culture.*



## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

If you've ever visited another country, you know things can be different.

- ▶ We've been taught it's rude to stick your tongue out at somebody, but that's actually a polite gesture in Tibet.
- ▶ We shake our heads when we mean "no," and nod our heads when we mean "yes." In Albania, those gestures are reversed.
- ▶ We like ketchup with our French fries, or perhaps a little mustard. The Dutch prefer mayonnaise.

Is one of these approaches better than another? No, just different. But even in this rich variety of preferences and styles, one truth is crucial in any cultural setting: the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel can speak into any culture—and does.

As the world becomes more diverse, we'll encounter different cultures, ethnicities, worldviews, and preferences in everyday life. As we take our final look at the Book of Acts, we'll see that's not a problem; it's an opportunity. The unstoppable gospel can impact any culture for Jesus Christ.

# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

## **Acts 17:16-18**

<sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him when he saw that the city was full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> Then also, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers argued with him. Some said, “What is this pseudo-intellectual trying to say?” Others replied, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities”—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the Resurrection.

Athens may have been the intellectual center of the world, but it was also a place of idolatry and superstition. Shrines and statues to Greek gods stood at the front door of every house, all around the marketplace, and even at street crossings. Athens alone may have held as many as 3,000 public statues and 30,000 idols. The Roman satirist Petronius Arbiter, who lived at that time, wrote that it was easier to find a god than a man in that city.<sup>1</sup>

All this idol worship broke Paul’s heart, but he chose to do something about it. He walked into the Agora—the marketplace—and sparked conversations. At the Agora he met two types of thinkers:

1. **Epicurean philosophers** believed the purpose of life was in finding pleasure and eliminating pain. They thought that God, if He existed at all, was not involved in their lives. Furthermore, they did not believe in life after death.
2. **Stoic philosophers** were pantheists, believing in an ultimate divine principle that exists throughout all the universe. They believed the way to realize your fullest potential was to live by reason. The Stoics believed they could eliminate suffering through intellectual perfection.

*What are the cultures and subcultures in your community?*

**QUESTION #2**

Here in the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire—where Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle had once taught, and where intellectuals still loved to debate—Paul dove right into the discussion with philosophers who were worlds apart from him in their beliefs. To be sure, these philosophers made fun of Paul, labeling him a “pseudo-intellectual.” But Paul was not deterred.

When you know the truth and realize people need to hear it, you just engage, whatever the consequences.

Remember the words of Jesus: “No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:15-16).

## **Acts 17:22-23**

**<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. <sup>23</sup> For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”**

When we meet someone different from us, we have a choice. We can focus on the differences and keep our distance, or we can find common ground and come together. We can build fences, or we can build bridges.

Paul was a bridge-builder.

When Paul talked about Jesus, some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers tagged him as a blowhard who didn’t know what he was talking about. But others were intrigued. They wanted to hear more. So they escorted Paul to the Areopagus, the Athenian court and the hill where it convened, for a public hearing of sorts.



## BUILDING BRIDGES

*Paul used an important element of Athenian culture to build a bridge to the gospel. Choose two of the following elements of our culture and record how followers of Christ might build a bridge from that element to the gospel.*

Movies

Sports

Reality TV

Music

Books

Video Games

"Then He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.'"

— MARK 16:15

Paul's audience didn't know about Jesus, nor did they believe in one God. Paul had no obvious connecting point to begin a conversation, but he found one: they worshiped, and so did Paul. Granted, they were worshiping the wrong things, but at least they were spiritual seekers. Paul used their spirituality to make a connection.

The construction of an altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" was clearly the Athenians' attempt to make sure they didn't unintentionally forget, and thereby risk offending, one of the gods. Paul used their acknowledgment that there could be a god they didn't know as an opening to introduce them to "The God who made the world and everything in it" (v. 24). Moving forward, he proclaimed the truth about God and His plan to save them.

With the growing diversity in America, most of us rub shoulders daily with people who are very different from us. Separated by language, culture, religion, race, ethnicity, and politics, sometimes it's hard to find common ground. Yet, when you begin to look for a connecting point, you'll find it. Love of family, the pain of loss, hobbies and interests, food, work, health—these are things we all share.

Make it a point to look and listen for bridge-building material.

## **Acts 17:30-31**

**<sup>30</sup> "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead."**

It's great to go where people are and get involved in what they're doing. It's great to ask questions and start discussions. But it doesn't end there. To stop there is like walking away from the marathon just short of the finish line.

*What principles and practices can we gain from Paul's approach to sharing the gospel?*

### QUESTION #3

*Why are so many Christians comfortable with remaining silent?*

### QUESTION #4

During the days of Elisha, the Arameans were at war with Israel. The city of Samaria was under siege and food was scarce (see 2 Kings 6:8,24-25). One day, four lepers, living outside the city because of their disease, decided to go to the Arameans in hopes of finding food. To their astonishment, the Aramean camp was a ghost town. During the night, the Lord had caused the Arameans to flee. They left behind food, clothing, silver, and gold. The four lepers had escaped their dire straits and landed in paradise.

The lepers ate and drank their fill and hid their plunder (see 7:5-8). Then they remembered their kinsmen starving back in the city. "Then they said to each other, 'We're not doing what is right. Today is a day of good news. If we are silent and wait until morning light, our sin will catch up with us. *Let's go tell the king's household*'" (v. 9, emphasis added).

Those of us who know Jesus are a lot like those lepers who found hope. We have found the answer to our deepest need, but it's also the answer to the deepest needs of all those people "back in the city" who don't yet know Jesus as Savior. This is a day of good news! The gospel is too good not to share.

As Paul spoke at the Areopagus, he couched the message in terms familiar to his listeners. He quoted their poets and spoke their language. But he still got down to the gospel. The Athenians struggled to accept God as Creator and Judge and to believe in Jesus' resurrection, but on these points, Paul did not compromise the truth of the gospel.

Paul met them on their grounds, brought the truth of Jesus into the conversation, and crossed the finish line in communicating the gospel. The rest was up to God.

***How can our group engage one or more of the cultures in our community?***

**QUESTION #5**

## LIVE IT OUT

We have an imperative to take the gospel to the world, but the nations have also come to us. Therefore:

- ▶ **Get educated.** Learn about the different cultures of the people in your community. Ask about their customs, heritage, and beliefs. Attend an ethnic festival or performance. Become a student of different cultures in an effort to start discussions.
- ▶ **Get spiritual.** Follow Paul's example by attending a worship service within a different culture. Seek out common ground in order to build bridges between that culture and Christ.
- ▶ **Get official.** Talk with a staff person at your church about forming a ministry outreach to serve the different cultures in your community.



Yes, things are different in other countries and in other cultures. Those differences are neither bad nor good, yet they present a wonderful opportunity to share the good news about Jesus.

My thoughts



## A SHARD OF GLASS

BY RUSSELL MOORE

Next to me on my desk is a shard of glass, small, jagged, rugged. If you were to see it, your first instinct might be to sweep it up and to toss it into the trash. But it's been with me for most of my life now, and it means almost everything to me.

I picked it up off the pavement outside my home church back in Biloxi, Mississippi. A group of us kids were playing ball in front of the church before a Sunday evening service. Somebody threw a ball too close to the building. It hit the window, and the glass rained down all around us. Something in me moved me to kneel down and pick up this remnant, and it's been with me through every stage of my life ....



Seeing the window at the front of that church shatter disoriented me—and not only because I was afraid that we were going to be called into a swarm of angry deacons. It was also that this sanctuary seemed to me to be the most permanent thing I could imagine—a doorway to the transcendent. Every summer I would march with the other children through those same front doors for the opening ceremonies of Vacation Bible School. ... At the front of the line would stand one of us chosen to carry the American flag. Close behind him would stand another carrying the Christian flag. We would march into the sanctuary as the piano and organ streamed the majestic march “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” ...

That little Mississippi congregation pictured something to me even without words — something that has lingered to this moment. Hanging over the American flag, hanging over the Christian flag, hanging over all of us, up there above the baptistery was a cross. That pinewood cross pictured an ancient truth that no government, no emperor, no court, no army, no church could stand above or beside the kingship of the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. ...

As I write this, I sit a block from the United States Capitol in a city gleaming with marble, signifying the greatest political and military power the world has ever known. It all seems so permanent. The shard of glass in my hand reminds me that nothing this side of the New Jerusalem is as unshakeable as we think. ...

The days ahead will probably be quite different than those faced by our parents and grandparents. We will be forced to articulate things we once could assume. That is nothing to wring our hands over. That is no call to retreat or to surrender. ... We may be seen as strange in American culture. If so, onward Christian strangers. ...

In the public square, orthodox, evangelical Christianity has articulated a vision of human dignity, of religious liberty, of family stability—sometimes heroically, though never consistently enough. In that, these Christians sought to remind the church that we are to be the sort of people who recognize justice and righteousness. We should continue the best of that tradition. We should push back against the fallenness and injustice around us and within us.

We live in a world where too many children are disposed of as medical waste and ... where too many persons are trafficked and molested, too many are ravaged by divorce and poverty. ... We ought to stand

then with conviction and contend, as the prophets and apostles did before us, against injustice. But we must do so with voices shaped by the gospel with a convictional kindness that recognizes that winning arguments is not enough if one is in a cosmic struggle with unseen principalities and powers in the air around us.

At the same time, we must recognize that this is a different day. The Bible Belt will not long be a safe haven for “traditional moral values.” ... Let’s not seek to resuscitate the old civil religions. Let’s work, instead, for something new and for something old: the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, gathered in churches of transformed people reconciled to one another, on mission with one another, holding together the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. Let’s avoid the temptation to keep saying the same thing we’ve always said, except louder and angrier. And let’s avoid the temptation of retreating into our subculture or of disentangling the gospel from our concern for human well-being. If we do not surrender to the spirit of the age—and we must not—we will be thought to be culture-warriors. So be it. Let’s be Christ-shaped, Kingdom-first culture warriors.

We all see, the Bible tells us, “through a glass, darkly,” but I find myself looking more and more at the world through that little shard of shattered stained glass. It reminds me of who I am, where I come from, and Who found me there. But it also reminds me of brokenness, of loss, of what it means to live in a universe at war. It reminds me that no matter how rooted we are, we are strangers and aliens still. We are all broken shards of glass, rejected building stones, being fitted into a temple we cannot fully even imagine. The gospel we’ve received isn’t just strange to the culture around us; it’s strange to us too. That’s what makes it good news.

It’s our turn to march into the future. And we do so not as a moral majority or a righteous remnant, but just as crucified sinners with nothing to offer the world but a broken body and spilled blood and unceasing witness. We are strangers and exiles on our best days, but we are not orphans and wanderers. Our strangeness is only hopeful if it is freakishly clinging to the strange, strange mission of Christ crucified and risen. Pursuing righteousness and justice are of no purpose if it doesn’t flow from seeking the kingdom first. Beside us there may be flags, and we’ll pledge allegiance where we ought and where we can. But over, always over us, there’s a cross. We may not always see where we are going, but we know the Way. Onward.

***"We are all broken  
shards of glass,  
rejected building  
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