



## SESSION 6

# UNSTOPPABLE IMPACT

### ▶ ***The Point***

The gospel of Jesus Christ can impact any culture.

### ▶ ***The Passage***

Acts 17:16-18,22-23,30-31

### ▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

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

- ▶ We've been taught it's rude to stick your tongue out at somebody, but in Tibet, that's a very polite gesture.
- ▶ 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 will encounter different cultures, ethnicities, worldviews, and preferences in everyday life. That's not a problem; it's an opportunity. We have a command to make disciples of all nations and an unstoppable gospel that can impact any culture for Jesus Christ.

### ▶ ***The Setting***

During Paul's second missionary journey, Paul and his companions brought the gospel into Europe for the first time. After visiting Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, Paul traveled to Athens. While waiting for his companions to join him, Paul preached the gospel to the people of Athens—to the Jews in the synagogue, to the general populace in the marketplace, and to the leadership at the Areopagus.

## What does the Bible say?

**Epicurean** (v. 18)—The Greek philosopher Epicurus taught that pleasure and materialism were the highest priorities. While not denying the existence of gods, Epicureans believed them to be unengaged and unconcerned deities.

**Stoic** (v. 18)—Stoics held that the divine principle (*logos*) was present in all things, including human beings, and held the universe together. They argued that reason and self-sufficiency were of highest importance.

**The Areopagus** (v. 22)—This “hill of Ares” was above the marketplace (agora) and beneath the Acropolis in Athens. It was a meeting place where lectures were given and also the site of a prestigious court that judged civil, criminal, and even some religious cases.

### **Acts 17:16-18,22-23,30-31**

<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.

<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.

<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.”

# GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes



**DISCUSS:** Question #1 on page 107 of the PSG: **“What do you enjoy most about different cultures?”**

**Note:** Consider using follow-up questions to help group members share extra information. For example, if a group member relates that she enjoys the food from different cultures, follow up by asking which types of food are her favorites.

**ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL):** Give your group members a chance to celebrate

other cultures and have some fun by bringing a piñata to your gathering. Hang the piñata in an open space and let group members take turns hitting it with a stick (while blindfolded) until it bursts open and spills out treats for everyone.

**Note:** If possible, fill the piñata with individually wrapped candies and treats from several different cultures.

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 108 of the PSG. Continue the topic of impacting different cultures for Christ by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to “The Point” on page 108 of the PSG: **“The gospel of Jesus Christ can impact any culture.”**

**LEADER PACK:** Display Pack Item 9, “Whatever the Consequences,” to highlight the major theme of this session.

**PRAY:** Transition into the discussion by proclaiming the truth that God is not limited to any time or culture; He is the Creator of everything and the Lord of all. Ask for wisdom as your group explores the mandate to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people.

Notes



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

### 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.

**READ:** Acts 17:16-18 on page 109 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

**GUIDE:** Use the first two paragraphs on page 139 of this Leader Guide to help group members understand what Paul encountered in Athens and whom he sought out in the city.

**SUMMARIZE:** Highlight the main points from pages 109-110 of the PSG:

1. "Athens may have been the intellectual center of the world, but it was also a place of idolatry and superstition."
2. "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."
3. "When you know the truth and realize people need to hear it, you just engage, whatever the consequences."

**DISCUSS:** Question #2 on page 109 of the PSG: **"What are the cultures and subcultures in your community?"**

**Note:** The goal here is to help group members identify the different demographic elements in their communities—with the ultimate goal of determining how to share the gospel within each group.

**TRANSITION:** As we continue with verses 22-23, we'll see an example of the strategy Paul used to build bridges between the Athenian culture and the gospel.

#### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

*In what ways is our culture similar and different from the one Paul visited in Athens?*

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## Acts 17:16-18 Commentary

**[Verse 16]** While Paul waited for his friends and ministry companions (Silas and Timothy) to join him in Athens, he made his way through the city. The Greeks acknowledged hundreds of gods and goddesses, and Athens, as Greece's cultural center, was widely recognized for its buildings and works of art dedicated to Greek deities. Luke noted that **the city was full of** these images. Paul's **spirit was troubled** by the **idols** he saw throughout the city. The Greek word translated *troubled* pictures someone who is highly irritated or even burning with anger.

**[Verse 17]** While in Athens, Paul sought out the **Jews** and God-fearers—that is, Gentiles who **worshiped God**. While the Jewish population probably was not large, there was a **synagogue** in the city where Paul **reasoned** on the Sabbath with both the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. But Paul also spent time **every day** in the **marketplace**, which was not only the commercial hub in Athens but also the center of business, law, and politics. There, he witnessed to the Athenian people **who happened to be there**.

In other words, Paul looked for every opportunity to share the gospel message with the people in the city wherever he found them.

**[Verse 18]** Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the marketplace heard Paul's words and **argued with him**. The **Epicurean** philosophers taught that pleasure and materialism were the highest priorities of life. While not denying the existence of gods, they believed them to be unengaged and unconcerned deities. They also believed that the human soul ceased to exist at death. The **Stoic** philosophers believed that the divine principle was present in all things, including human beings, and held the universe together; however, they argued that human reason, self-sufficiency, and moral integrity were of highest importance in this life.

That Paul was in the marketplace daily implies that they talked with him on more than one occasion. Even so, they apparently didn't understand the message he was speaking. Some of them referred to Paul as a **pseudo-intellectual**. The philosophers used this term to suggest his thinking was not developed and he really didn't understand what he was talking about. Others thought Paul was preaching about **foreign deities**. They may have thought he was advocating new gods. This could have been serious because there were laws in Greece against upsetting the state religion or introducing new gods without the approval of the authorities. Still, it's unknown whether the philosophers actually wanted to cause trouble for Paul because of what he was preaching or if they truly had an interest in debating with him.



10 minutes

# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

### 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.

**READ:** Acts 17:22-23 on page 110 of the PSG.

**RECAP:** Call attention to the first two paragraphs after the Scripture text on page 110 of the PSG:

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.

#### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

*How can we use the things we have in common with others as a gateway to sharing Jesus?*

**DISCUSS:** Question #3 on page 112 of the PSG: "What principles and practices can we gain from Paul's approach to sharing the gospel?"

**DO:** Direct group members to complete the activity "Building Bridges" on page 111 of the PSG. If time permits, encourage volunteers to share their responses.

*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

**TRANSITION:** We've seen Paul speak boldly about the truth of the gospel. As we conclude with verses 30-31, we'll see why it's critically important for every disciple of Jesus to do the same.



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## Acts 17:22-23 Commentary

**[Verse 22]** Eventually, Paul was taken to the **Areopagus** (“hill of Ares”), which may refer to either the hill itself or to the court by that name that traditionally met on the hill. Some biblical scholars believe Paul was brought to the Areopagus simply to address the philosophers and others in Athens. But certain elements in the biblical text seem to indicate Paul was brought there to face some type of legal proceedings (not necessarily a trial) because of his preaching.

Paul took advantage of the opportunity to witness for Christ. But he was careful to build a bridge to his audience—to find a common ground for sharing the gospel. As he **stood in the middle of the Areopagus**, he began by acknowledging that the **men of Athens** were **extremely religious**. The Greek word for *religious* means “fearing or reverencing the gods.” Depending on the context, it can be either a positive or negative word. Paul may have used this word intentionally, since the Athenians saw themselves as very devoted to their gods and would have been honored by his description of them, while Paul viewed them as superstitious pagans.

**[Verse 23]** Paul then shared his experience of **passing through** the city, where he was confronted with so many idols. Paul referred to these as **objects of ... worship** for the Athenians. Most of the statues or altars placed throughout the city had inscriptions identifying a particular god or goddess to whom the structures were dedicated. Paul had discovered one dedicated **“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.”**

Many people in Athens were polytheists—they believed in multiple gods who ruled the world and influenced human affairs. But because they were superstitious, they wanted to be careful not to offend any of the deities, whether the ones they knew or others they did not know. Paul started with the beliefs of the Athenians, and used those beliefs to transition to the truth he wanted them to know. He noted that the people worshiped this unknown deity **in ignorance**. To be ignorant was not a demeaning term as it is often used today (sometimes synonymous with “stupid” or “idiot”). Rather, it simply referred to someone who didn’t know or understand. And because of this, Paul was prepared to teach them about this God they didn’t know.

In just a few sentences Paul told them about the God of creation who is Lord over all (see vv. 24-29). Paul was careful to emphasize that this God does not exist in inanimate, man-made statues, but is a personal God who wants a relationship with all humanity. Paul’s intent wasn’t for the people simply to add God as one of the many deities they acknowledged and feared. Rather, he wanted them to know the one true God who could transform their lives.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

### 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.”*

**READ:** Acts 17:30-31 on page 112 of the PSG.

**GUIDE:** Use the first three paragraphs of page 113 of the PSG to read or summarize the story of the lepers from 2 Kings 6.

**RECAP:** Use the final two paragraphs on page 113 of the PSG to connect that story with Paul’s experiences in the Areopagus:

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.

**DISCUSS:** Question #4 on page 112 of the PSG: **“Why are so many Christians comfortable with remaining silent?”**

**DISCUSS:** Question #5 on page 113 of the PSG: **“How can our group engage one or more of the cultures in our community?”**

**Note:** Encourage your group to be practical when discussing this question. What steps can you take to reach a specific culture with the gospel?

**GUIDE:** Refer back to “The Point” of this session: **“The gospel of Jesus Christ can impact any culture.”** As time allows, encourage volunteers to share any final thoughts and questions.

#### ALTERNATE QUESTION:

*What are some of the ways we rationalize our silence when we miss opportunities to share the gospel?*



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## Acts 17:30-31 Commentary

**[Verse 30]** After telling the Athenians about the one true God, Paul again mentioned their **ignorance**. God had **overlooked** their lack of knowledge about Him and their worship of false gods. The Greek word for *overlooked* does not mean that God condoned their idolatry (sin). He did not. But for some reason, God in His forbearance had delayed in bringing judgment upon all who worshiped false gods. Ultimately, we know it's because of God's mercy, which is in some ways difficult for us to fully understand. Probably God was being "patient," as Peter noted in his epistle, "not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

While God had previously overlooked their ignorance, Paul insisted this was no longer the case because the people were no longer ignorant. Paul was proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ to them. Now they were without excuse for their idolatry. Paul clearly stated what God expected the people to do: **repent**. Repentance refers to a radical change of thinking; God commanded the people of Athens to change their thinking about gods and God after hearing the truth. But the word *repent* also includes a change of action—it involves a transformative change in the direction of a person's entire life, turning away from sin and turning toward God. And just as Paul was clear in what God expected the people to do, he was also clear on when God wanted them to do it: **now**. God's message is for **all people everywhere**. No one is exempt; everyone is called and commanded to turn away from wrong thinking and their lives of sin, and to embrace the truth of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ through repentance.

**[Verse 31]** Paul added that God would be their **judge**. In His providence, God has **set a day** when judgment will be carried out upon all people. This is the day when God will finally and completely deal with the problem of sin. No one knows the day or the time, so it's imperative for everyone to be prepared. The basis of God's judgment will not be arbitrary; rather, God will **judge the world in righteousness**. God is righteous (or just), in that He is perfectly righteous Himself and will judge everyone fairly. Before the judgment of God, all people who refuse to repent will be justly declared guilty of sin. Righteous also refers to those in right standing with God or a right relationship with God.

**The Man** God **has appointed** as judge—Jesus Christ—will decide whether every human has right standing with God. And this righteousness comes only through a relationship of faith with God's Son. Moreover, God **provided proof ... to everyone** that Jesus is the rightful judge **by raising Him from the dead**. Because Jesus experienced death on the cross and resurrection, every human being has the opportunity to receive forgiveness for his or her sins and experience eternal life. But this comes only to those who repent and believe in what Jesus did for them. Like the Athenians, every person must make a decision either to accept or reject what God offers.



## Notes

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## PETER'S MESSAGES

BY JERRY N. BARLOW

What is Christian preaching according to Peter? Are his discourses in Acts sermons or speeches? If sermons, what form did Peter follow and what themes did he preach? How do his messages compare with each other and with first-century apostolic preaching?

The first half of Acts contains Peter's discourses. He has 8 of the 24 speeches that comprise almost a third of the verses in Acts.<sup>1</sup> But scholars do not agree on which, if any, of the 8 are sermons. How can we decide what Luke, the probable writer of Acts, thought were Peter's sermons?

One way is to look for characteristics in Peter's discourses common to first-century Jewish and Christian preaching. Lawrence Willis described such preaching as an oral form in three parts: an *exempla* (an introduction of authoritative evidence such as scriptural quotations), a conclusion (drawn from the *exempla*), and an exhortation (usually in the imperative).<sup>2</sup>



What Peter spoke to the crowd in Acts 2 fits the first-century three-part sermon pattern. Peter began by quoting from Joel 2:28-32 and then from Psalms 16 and 110 with reference to Jesus (Acts 2:14-35, the *exempla*). Peter's conclusion was that Jesus is "both Lord and Christ" (2:36). The exhortation given was to repent and be baptized in Jesus' name (vv. 38-39).<sup>3</sup> Peter's response to the crowd about the lame man's healing (3:12-26) also shows this sermon form.

Another characteristic that made first-century apostolic preaching Christian was its content. First-century apostolic preaching proclaimed Christ. Because Peter proclaimed the gospel, some scholars call these Acts passages "missionary sermons." How do these "sermons" differ? How are they similar? Peter's messages vary in setting. He preached in different places and under different circumstances. The different settings did not change the gospel content of Peter's messages, but the "content" of the context changed Peter's preaching style.

Another sermon style difference was evident in how Peter presented Christ in his preaching to Jews versus Gentiles. Peter adapted his preaching to his hearers.

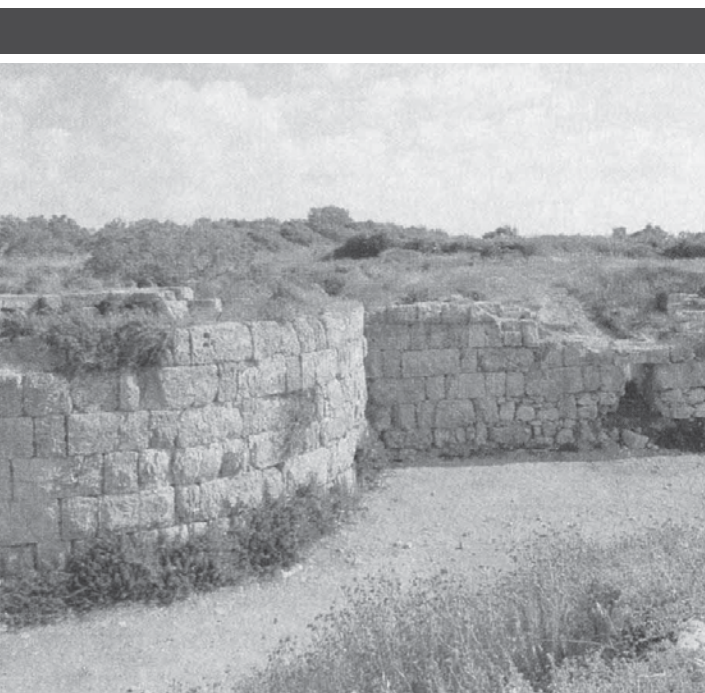
Effective preaching "connects." Both Peter and Paul connected with Jewish hearers through preaching Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. With Gentiles, the gospel connection came through knowing God and being saved in the face of death. Effective preaching also communicates. Peter's messages were clear and simple in style. His content was not complicated in words, figures of speech, or sentence structure. Peter logically developed his messages with objective facts (they took Jesus, crucified Him, and put Him to death, 2:23) and not with subjective material.<sup>4</sup>

Peter preached with a personal style. His messages often used the first person in references: such as, "we are all witnesses" (v. 32, *NIV*). Like Jesus, Peter did not separate himself from those who needed to hear the gospel.

Like Jesus, Peter also preached with urgency. The mood of his messages was not casual or contemplative. Peter never said, "Why don't you give the gospel some thought?" His content exhorted hearers to act! Imperatives urged his hearers to respond! Urgency characterized Peter's preaching due to Christ's mandate ("He commanded us to preach," 10:42, *NIV*); the blessings of salvation; and Peter's eyewitness experiences. Urgency led Peter to warn and to plead; yet he did so with respect.

Peter's preaching had impact. Hearers reacted and responded to his messages. Why? What factors made Peter's messages move hearers to action? Impact in preaching can come as a result of form, content, sermon style, and delivery. Certainly, the factors of form, content, and style already discussed aided the impact of Peter's messages—but what about his delivery? Quite likely, energy, eye contact, and extemporaneous delivery often characterized Peter's preaching. His personality and the electric atmosphere in the situations where he spoke probably energized his messages and hearers.

Peter conveyed power and thus had impact beyond the factors related to form, content, sermon style,



and delivery. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus assured Peter and the other disciples that they would receive power through the coming of the Holy Spirit (1:8). What power a Spirit-infused preaching and message have! Acts mentions that the Spirit filled or directed Peter: Acts 2:4; 4:8,31; 10:19; 11:12.

After having received the Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles witnessed and preached the Word of God with boldness and power. And that included Peter and his preaching! Peter preached a powerful Word (the gospel “is the power of God that brings salvation,” Romans 1:16, *NIV*) with powerful impact! But the impact of Peter’s messages was aided by another factor.

Peter was not a formally educated person. He was a fisherman who was “unschooled” and “ordinary” (Acts 4:13, *NIV*)—but who became an extraordinary, powerful preacher. How? As the members of the Sanhedrin realized, Peter and the other apostles “had been with Jesus” (v. 13, *NIV*). Preaching with impact results when the Spirit empowers a prepared preacher!

During Jesus’ time with Peter and the other disciples, Jesus taught them the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). He prepared them to know and give witness to the gospel (vv. 46–48). The impact of Peter’s messages came as a result of a preacher prepared spiritually (“filled with the Spirit”) and homiletically (he knew the Scriptures).

Peter’s understanding of God’s Word also contributed to the breadth of his preaching. Many scholars believe that we have only summaries of Peter’s actual messages in Acts and that Luke used a common structure for the Acts discourses. Yet to read Acts is to see the Peter of the Gospels, a fisherman carrying out his Lord’s commission: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17, *NIV*). And from Luke’s presentation of Peter’s messages, we find these principles for Christian preaching:

- ▶ Preach Christ and the gospel of Christ—construct evangelistic sermons from Scripture.

- ▶ Preach to connect—consider the hearers and the sermon situation.
- ▶ Preach to communicate—use clear and uncomplicated sermon content and construction.
- ▶ Preach with urgency and power—prepare spiritually and homiletically.

In other words, Christian preaching with impact will be biblical, Christ-centered, relational, and Spirit-anointed. Is this the preaching you hear—or do?

## BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

This article is based on a full-length article by Jerry N. Barlow that originally appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of *Biblical Illustrator* magazine. Each quarter *Biblical Illustrator* offers in-depth articles and information that support our weekly Bible study lessons. You can subscribe to *Biblical Illustrator* by going to [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator), by using your church’s quarterly literature order form, or by calling 1-800-458-2772.

1. John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 43.
2. Lawrence Wills, “The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 3–4 (1984): 278–280.
3. *Ibid.*, 286–87.
4. Warren W. Wiersbe and Lloyd M. Perry, *The Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 14–15.