

SESSION 13

PRACTICAL EVANGELISM

OUR COMMUNITIES LOOK MUCH more like Acts 17 than Acts 2 these days. We once lived in Jerusalem, but we now live in Athens. How will we reach the people of our day? In Paul's gospel encounter with unchurched Greeks (Acts 17:16-34), we see a window into practical witnessing today. We can see how to share the good news of Jesus by helping others see the character of God, the condition of man, the cross of Christ, and the confession of God's people. Let's look at these basic truths of the gospel to be presented and practical ways to share the good news with an unbeliever.

STEPS TO PREPARE

1. Read the main passages for this study, recording your insights and questions:
▷ Acts 17:16-34
2. Review the Teaching Plan (pp.138-141).
▷ Refine the lesson plan based on your group's particular needs.
▷ Adjust the plan if necessary.
3. Study the Expanded Lesson Content (pp.142-147).
▷ Determine what elements of this lesson are most applicable to your particular group.
▷ Consider ways to personalize the lesson content for you and your class.
4. Pray for the Lord's guidance as you lead your group through this material.

LESSON OUTLINE

IN SHARING THE GOSPEL, POINT PEOPLE TO...

1. *The Character of God (Acts 17:16-27).*
2. *The Condition of Man (Acts 17:28-30).*
3. *The Cross of Christ (Acts 17:31).*
4. *The Confession of God's People (Acts 17:30-34).*

SESSION 13

TEACHING PLAN

PRACTICAL EVANGELISM

CONNECT

OPTION 1

Communicate the writer's experience of sharing the gospel with a young professional couple (p.142).



What are some circumstances that have given you the opportunity to share the gospel with someone?

OPTION 2

For this option, show students the short video "Awkward Invite: Cat Funeral" from Skit Guys as a comical way to begin a discussion on evangelism (you can find this video online). Use the questions below to have a short discussion with students before turning to the transition part of the session.



Why is this a bad example of witnessing? What could have helped to have made it less awkward?



When was the last time you had a conversation with someone about Jesus? Why do you think people find it difficult to share their faith with others?

TRANSITION

In this session, we will look at Paul and his witness to Gentile unbelievers in the city of Athens. In Acts 17, Paul found himself in Athens and provoked by the rampant idolatry (Acts 17:16). These were not irreligious people, but they knew nothing of God's Story of good news.

Our communities look much more like Acts 17 than Acts 2 these days. We once lived in Jerusalem, but we now live in Athens. How will we reach the people of our day? In Paul's gospel encounter with unchurched Greeks (Acts 17:16-34), we see a window into practical witnessing today. We can see how to share the good news of Jesus by helping others see the character of God, the condition of man, the cross of Christ, and the confession of God's people. Let's look at these basic truths of the gospel to be presented and practical ways to share the good news with an unbeliever.

NOTES:

CONVEY**IN SHARING THE GOSPEL, POINT PEOPLE TO...****1. THE CHARACTER OF GOD.**

Read Acts 17:16-27, asking students to listen for where Paul began in the story line of Scripture as he shared the gospel in the Areopagus (the creation, v. 24). Show how God's loving and gracious character motivated Paul to be burdened for those who did not know God. Explain the three things people will be able to tell about us as we are so motivated (pp.143-144).



At this point, consider using the story "What Creation Reveals" in the Personal Study Guide (p.109) as a way to illustrate this point. A brief synopsis has been provided for you in the sidebar.



Which of these three characteristics would you struggle with the most when sharing Christ with unbelievers? How can you strengthen that characteristic in your life?

Note how Paul began his witness to Christ in the worldview of his Gentile audience and moved to talk about the Creator God. The creation is an appropriate starting point for sharing the gospel (p.144).



How have you experienced the good and holy character of God through His creation and your life circumstances?

When I share Christ with someone... Discuss practical ways to share the gospel by starting with creation (pp.144-145).

2. THE CONDITION OF MAN.

Ask a volunteer to read Acts 17:28-30. Show how Paul moved on from common ground to show, in love, the error of their idolatry. Highlight some implications of humanity's fallen condition that we need to keep in mind as we share Christ and point out sin (p.145).



At this point, consider using the story "Witness" in the Personal Study Guide (p.110) as a way to illustrate this point. A brief synopsis has been provided for you in the sidebar.



What motivates you to share Christ with others? What hinders you?



Why is a recognition of one's sin necessary for salvation?

When I share Christ with someone... Discuss practical ways to help people begin to grasp the reality and destructiveness of sin (p.145).

WHAT CREATION REVEALS

God's character compels us to share the gospel with others. Hopefully we see others' need for His love, grace, holiness, and mercy. And hopefully we desire that they too would be transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Let us use our testimonies and our world to point out the character of God to others. And may we be vigilant in sharing God's character so others see their need for Jesus.

► *How can you use your testimony to point others to Jesus?*

WITNESS

Speaking the truth about the fallen nature of man and the consequences of sin can be difficult, but it is necessary when we are sharing our faith. It is because humanity is broken that we need redemption through Christ Jesus. As we share about our sinful condition, we should do so with an attitude of love. We should always point to the eternal, joyful hope that is offered in Christ through the gospel.

► *How has the gospel changed your life? Do you believe it can change the lives of those around you? Explain.*

PREACHING THE CROSS

The cross of Christ is central to the gospel, for it is in the cross of Christ that we see both God's justice and mercy being displayed at the same time. Not only that, but it is a sobering reminder of the reality of both our sin and the payment that was made to forgive our sin. The cross is where our Savior died, as well as the place where our Savior made atonement for our sins. It's a reminder of what God has done to rescue us.

► What does the cross of Christ mean to you?

CONFESSING JESUS

As people who are redeemed by a loving and merciful God, it should bring us joy and pleasure to share this good news with others. It isn't enough to simply know the truth of the gospel; we are called to declare it to those around us who have never heard.

► How do you feel about sharing the gospel? Scared? Excited? Explain.

3. THE CROSS OF CHRIST.

Ask a volunteer to read Acts 17:31, and highlight how Paul referred to Jesus. Note that in referencing Jesus as having been raised from the dead, he at least implied the cross. Use 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 to show explicitly the content of Paul's message (p.146).



Why is it important to not merely have a religious conversation? What does a conversation like that sound like?



At this point, consider using the story "Preaching the Cross" in the Personal Study Guide (p.113) as a way to illustrate this point. A brief synopsis has been provided for you in the sidebar.



When possible, why should our evangelistic conversations include the death and resurrection of Jesus? Why is this important?

When I share Christ with someone... Discuss practical ways to make the beauty of God's grace at the cross stand out so people can recognize it and long for it (p.146).

4. THE CONFESSION OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

Read Acts 17:30-34, and ask group members to mark in the Scripture passage the three types of responses that resulted from Paul's sharing of the gospel. Say that the message of the gospel is incomplete without a call to respond. We must challenge people to repent and believe in Jesus, even though this will cause tension (pp.146-147).



How can we overcome the fear and be bold for the glory of Christ?

Note the three possible responses of people (p.147).



At this point, consider using the story "Confessing Jesus" in the Personal Study Guide (p.115) as a way to illustrate this point. A brief synopsis has been provided for you in the sidebar.



How should we as Christians think, feel, and act with respect to each possible response from others?

When I share Christ with someone... Discuss practical ways to call people to respond to the gospel and follow Christ (p.x).

COLLIDE

As we begin to bring our study to a close, it is fitting that we end with two very practical sessions on evangelism and discipleship.

There are a number of important takeaways from this session, such as the main points of an evangelistic conversation. This can be really helpful given that most people struggle with sharing their Christian beliefs with others, especially if those fears stem from an uncertainty of what to say. By providing a basic outline for students to follow, we can help equip students to be more faithful in sharing the gospel with others.



Using your own words, summarize the main points of this lesson by imagining yourself in an evangelistic conversation with someone.

In addition to the benefit of having an evangelistic outline to follow, this session will also help students know how to navigate conversations of this type. In other words, it is one thing to know what to say, but it also takes additional insight and wisdom to present the gospel in a conversation. The evangelistic tips and insights presented in this session will provide students with advice as they share the gospel.



Why do you think the way you say something is also important when communicating to others? How could an unloving tone and presentation distract others from the content of the gospel message?



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

NOTES:

EXPANDED LESSON CONTENT

PRACTICAL EVANGELISM

IN SHARING THE GOSPEL, POINT PEOPLE TO THE CHARACTER OF GOD, THE CONDITION OF MAN, THE CROSS OF CHRIST, AND THE CONFESSION OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

OPENING ILLUSTRATION AND DISCUSSION STARTER



Almost four years ago, I began to lead a ministry to young professionals at our church. I have a particular burden for the unchurched young pros in our area. As we prayed for God to help us reach this group that most churches struggle to touch, I met Allie and her fiancé, Colton. They had moved from New England to Raleigh—young adults on their own for the first time. Seeking a fresh start and community, Allie visited our church.

The following week, I sat down with them and shared the good news of the gospel. I talked about our beautiful world, how marvelous and harmonious it is. We talked

about how we as people are obviously unique in the world. Allie had just graduated from college having studied graphic design, so we talked about creativity and art and, although I did not use the term, the *imago Dei* (the image of God).

I asked her if she had noticed that something has gone wrong in this world. Allie completely agreed and mentioned some ways she had seen that, such as health issues, family circumstances, and so on. Then I told her why Jesus came—not primarily to get us to toe the line of a moral code or to follow a religious ritual but to be our Rescuer, to set us free from the brokenness of sin and to give us life. I explained the hope of the restoration and how the Story of the gospel makes sense of all of our lives.

By God's grace, this did make sense to Allie, and she trusted and followed Jesus. Some time later, after witnessing God's change in Allie and through attending a small group in a home in our area, Colton also met Jesus. I baptized both of them in the Atlantic Ocean and married them on the beach the same day.

Allie and Colton represent a lot of Americans today. They were not disinterested in spiritual things, yet they were somewhat wary of the church. They sought real spirituality and genuine community. From this

Note to the leader:

This session is intended to help train your group for the calling of proclaiming the gospel to a lost world. But not all groups are comprised solely of believers. You may have a number of unbelievers in your group who need to hear a clear presentation of the gospel. This session can also do just that. As you teach, be mindful of the makeup of your group, and use this pattern of sharing the gospel in the most effective way for your context, relying upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Aim to share the gospel even as you teach others to share the gospel.

experience above and others, I have seen that the truth of the gospel shared in relationship through community provides a powerful way to reach people.



What are some circumstances that have given you the opportunity to share the gospel with someone?

IN SHARING THE GOSPEL, POINT PEOPLE TO...

1. THE CHARACTER OF GOD (ACTS 17:16-27).

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him when he saw that the city was full of idols. 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. 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. They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you’re speaking of? For what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these ideas mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new. Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. 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. The God who made the world and everything in it—He is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by hands. Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. From one man He has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. He did this so they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:16-27)

Having experienced firsthand the loving and gracious character of God, Paul simply had to tell others about Christ. We read in Acts 17:16 that as he looked across the city of Athens, “his spirit was troubled within him when he saw that the city was full of idols.” For Paul, the character of God was more than a theological idea; it moved him to be burdened for those who did not know God. His life was so shaped by God’s character that he could not help but be grieved over the idolatry of the Athenians.

VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Let eloquence be flung to the dogs rather than souls be lost. What we want is to win souls, and they are not to be won by flowery speeches. We must have the winning of souls at heart, and be red hot with zeal for their salvation; and then however much we blunder, according to the critics, we shall be numbered among those whom the Lord calls wise.¹

—Charles Spurgeon

God's character also motivates us to witness to His love, and when we live our lives to reflect the character of God, people will see it. The unsaved Athenians showed an interest in Paul's message as they heard him speak and watched his life (17:18-21). Some were not impressed by his "pseudo-intellectualism," and yet they invited him to the Areopagus, a debate space, to hear more. As we live for Christ and seek to share the gospel with others, remember three things people can tell about us:

- (1) **People can tell if you care for them.** The saying is true—people don't care how much you know about God until they know how much you care about them. Paul showed care for the Athenians in the way he witnessed to them. He began not by calling them a bunch of stupid pagans but by showing regard for the fact that they had a religious belief (vv. 22-23). He started where they were in their world and then took them to Christ.
- (2) **People can tell if you believe what you are talking about.** Paul shared the gospel with a passionate conviction.
- (3) **People can tell if the hand of God is on your life.** Paul's intellectual capacity seemed less effective than his godliness. He unashamedly spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, even though it was a controversial topic. If we seek to live for Christ, no matter the consequences, people will be able to tell.



Which of these three characteristics would you struggle with the most when sharing Christ with unbelievers? How can you strengthen that characteristic in your life?

Notice how Paul began his witness to Christ. He started in the worldview of his Gentile audience. From a general belief in deities, including even an unknown god, Paul moved to talk about the one true, righteous Creator God (vv. 22-29).

The Bible begins the gospel story with the creating God in Genesis 1. In John 1, we read of the redeemer Jesus, who was in the beginning and who created the world. In Romans 1:20, as Paul begins to unpack the beauty of the gospel, we are told that in creation God's invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, are clearly seen. The creation is an appropriate starting point for sharing the gospel because from it we can begin to explain the good and holy character of God.



How have you experienced the good and holy character of God through His creation and your life circumstances?

When I share Christ with someone... I almost always start with creation. "Isn't it a beautiful world?" I will ask. I have never had anyone disagree. We talk about the beach, the mountains, and things we love about the world around us. I then point out that there is something unique about us—we are created in God's image. Like Paul, I want to identify with the people I'm

FURTHER COMMENTARY

Paul's informal speeches and conversations in Athens resulted in an invitation to address the Areopagus—originally a court. Paul was not on trial in a formal sense. At this time in the history of Athens the Areopagus was a place where new ideas were heard and tested.²

—Stanley E. Porter

VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

God writes His Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but in trees, and flowers, and clouds, and stars.³

—Martin Luther

talking to in their belief system, but I move on from there to help them see the true character of the one and only God who created both them and me.

2. THE CONDITION OF MAN (ACTS 17:28-30).

For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Being God's offspring then, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:28-30)

After establishing common ground with his hearers, Paul moved on in love to show the error of their views, noting the foolishness of attempting to craft an image to worship when the true Creator, in whose image we are made, is enough. In calling on the Athenians to repent of their idolatry, he was helping them see their sinful condition before the one true God.



*What motivates you to share Christ with others?
What hinders you?*

In the process of sharing Christ and helping people see the reality of sin, we need to keep a few things in mind, even as Paul surely did:

- Sharing Christ and pointing out sin are to come from a motive of love—love for Christ and others as we share the good news with them. With the Holy Spirit's help, people must come to see their desperate need for Christ.
- People really are going to hell if they do not repent of their sin and believe in Jesus as the only way of rescue.
- We as witnesses of Jesus Christ are God's Plan A to reach the world—and He has not given us a Plan B! The Great Commission is not the Great Suggestion.



Why is a recognition of one's sin necessary for salvation?

When I share Christ with someone... Rather than starting with their specific, personal need because of sin, I first talk with people about the brokenness and obvious problems in the world that come as a result of the fall of humankind: natural disasters, cancer, crime, and so on. From there I note things like the tendency to be selfish and to do wrong. "I've never met a parent who had to teach their child to disobey, have you?" I will ask. Moving from general to the specific, often the person with whom I am talking will readily admit their own sin.

FURTHER COMMENTARY

Instead of the OT, Paul quoted some statements from pagan Greek writers who would be familiar to his audience. Though he quotes them with approval, this does not imply that he approves of others things that these writers said or wrote. The first quotation ('in him we live...') appears to be from a hymn to Zeus by Epimenides of Crete (c. 600 B.C.); the words are found just two lines later than the quotation Paul takes from the same poem in Titus 1:12. The second quotation here is from the poem Phainomena by the Stoic poet Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.).⁴

—John B. Polhill

3. THE CROSS OF CHRIST (ACTS 17:31).

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.” (Acts 17:31)

Paul was not interested in merely having a religious conversation; he sought to win people to Christ. So, he moved beyond the futility of the Athenians’ sinful religious belief (17:22-30) to the reality of the judgment of God and “the Man” to whom we all must submit.



Why is it important to not merely have a religious conversation? What does a conversation like that sound like?

We do not have the full account of everything Paul said to the Athenians in the Areopagus, but we can see that he unashamedly spoke of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul reminds us of the heart of the message we share: “For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”



When possible, why should our evangelistic conversations include the death and resurrection of Jesus? Why is this important?

When I share Christ with someone... I will sometimes ask, “Have you ever noticed how a great movie can bring together a theater filled with strangers at the key turning point of the film?” I want people to recognize that we love stories that move us and give us hope. This common response from people points to the supreme hope we are supposed to have in Christ. Only He can fulfill our deepest longings.

4. THE CONFESSION OF GOD’S PEOPLE (ACTS 17:30-34).

“Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, 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.” When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him. But others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” Then Paul left their presence. However, some men joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (Acts 17:30-34)

VOICES FROM THE CHURCH

‘What you win them with is what you win them to.’ When we win them with a Snuggie Theology, they are not going to be happy when they are told to take up a cross.⁵

—Kyle Idleman

The gospel story takes us from a beautiful creation and the uniqueness of humanity created in God's image through the devastation of the fall, showing the need for and the glory of the cross of Christ that provides eternal life and restoration. Yet the message of the gospel is incomplete without a call to respond. Each person must personally receive the salvation offered by Jesus through His people. Paul challenged his hearers to repent and believe (vv. 30-31).

We live in an increasingly secularized culture of political correctness, and because of that are often times timid in calling people to follow Jesus. Think about this: Paul found himself in a setting of unbelievers who had no respect for the Old Testament or for any exclusivist claims like a singular, resurrected Jesus. Yet he boldly called them to repent, and he warned them of judgment (vv. 30-31). We must do the same.



How can we overcome the fear and be bold for the glory of Christ?

In verses 32-34, we see three possible responses of people when we share Jesus. Take note of these:

- **Some mocked.** Yes, it is sad, but not all will love Jesus as we love Him. Not all will want His message. Some will mock us. In fact, if no one ever mocks us for our witness, it's a good sign we are not witnessing!
- **Some wanted to hear more.** Many people today have not rejected Jesus; they have rejected a caricature of Jesus. No one has ever really told them the truth of the gospel story. This is why every gospel conversation matters because even if people do not respond, we might have the opportunity to speak more with them later.
- **Some believed.** Yes, if you are faithful to witness, in God's timing, you will also be fruitful. What could be more amazing than knowing God used you in His great plan to touch someone for eternity!



How should we as Christians think, feel, and act with respect to each possible response from others?

When I share Christ with someone... I want to lead people to respond to the gospel and follow Christ.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes we will interact with people who have no idea about Jesus and His good news. Other times we will have to help people with a spiritual background to do more than simply affirm the truth mentally but also to respond in faith willfully. Not everyone we share the good news with will follow Christ. But as we share, we are being faithful to the commission Jesus has given us, and that is all He has asked of us.



FURTHER COMMENTARY

Paul's return to his starting-point provoked the scorn of some of his hearers. Although Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, the idea of a bodily resurrection was alien to their thinking, since the body was increasingly regarded as earthly and evil in comparison with the soul which was the seat of the divine in man. Not only was the cross 'folly to Gentiles,' but so also was the resurrection.⁶

—I. Howard Marshall

REFERENCES

1. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, reprint 1994), 223.
2. Stanley E. Porter, *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 1653, n. 17:19,22.
3. Martin Luther, recorded in *The Lutheran Witness*, vol. XXXVI (St. Louis: Concordia, 1917), 106.
4. John B. Polhill, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2122, n. 17:28.
5. Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 164.
6. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 291.