

EXPLAINING THE GOSPEL

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The gospel is explained to those who are eager (Acts 17:10-15).
2. The gospel is defended to those who are skeptical (Acts 17:16-18).
3. The gospel is proclaimed to those who are seeking (Acts 17:19-29).

Background Passage: Acts 17

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

When Paul encountered opposition on his second missionary journey, he did not allow it to stop the spread of the gospel but rather found new opportunities to proclaim the risen Christ.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When Paul saw an altar to an unknown god in Athens, he used it to proclaim the one true God to those who were listening. Jesus came to earth so that we might come to know God through Him, the perfect representation of God, being God Himself.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have come to know God through Jesus, we look in our culture for ways that we might be able to point others to the gospel so that they too might move from ignorance and disbelief to knowledge and faith in Christ.

GROUP TIME

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

INTRODUCTION

ASK: As participants arrive, ask: **Can you share the slogan of a famous company?** (answers will vary; be prepared to supply your own if your group is having trouble thinking of a few)

TRANSITION: Organizations recognize the value of having a simple, catchy, and compelling slogan to summarize their business or brand. In the world of marketing, advertisers spend hours testing and determining effective brand labels and catchphrases in order to sell their product. God's people do not have to get a jingle or brand name tested by the market. But we do have a need to be able to explain the gospel to people who are eager, skeptical, and seeking. By understanding the gospel message, we are able to engage the world in the greatest message that humans need to hear.

SUMMARIZE: Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- After the Jerusalem Council, Paul and his traveling companions took the gospel throughout the Mediterranean to other Jews and Gentiles who had yet to hear of Christ. As they faced opposition, they would move on to another community while seeking to establish believers in the truth of the gospel. The conflicts Paul faced did not stop him from proclaiming Christ but only motivated him to continue to bring the good news to others who would hear and believe.



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POINT 1

THE GOSPEL IS EXPLAINED TO THOSE WHO ARE EAGER (ACTS 17:10-15).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 17:10-15** from his or her Bible.

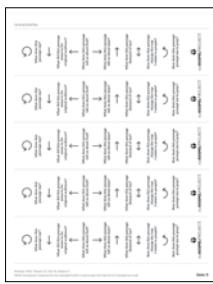
10 The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. **11** Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. **12** Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. **13** But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. **14** Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. **15** Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

HIGHLIGHT: Highlight the main actions made by the Bereans in Acts 17:11-12 (received the Word, examined the Scriptures, believed).

EXPLAIN: Using **verses 10-12** and **PACK ITEM 2: PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS MAP** to locate Berea and explain the following (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 30):

The Bereans not only heard the Word that was preached, but they received it, examined it, and believed it. This attitude should be ours as well.

- In the middle of Paul's second missionary journey, after fleeing Thessalonica because of a dangerous mob (vv. 5-9), Paul and Silas went away under the cover of night to Berea. Instead of taking a much-needed break, they immediately attended the local synagogue.
- While there, they discovered that these people were "more noble" than the Thessalonians (v. 11). Luke described them as receiving the message with great eagerness. And the result was that many of them believed.
- Luke noted that those who believed included some prominent Greek women and men.
- Our desire should be to believe the Word by obeying it. The Bereans not only heard the gospel, but they believed it and acted upon it. Our hearts should be quick to follow where the Scriptures guide us.



BEREA

Located 70 miles southwest of Thessalonica, it was a city in Macedonia. It means "place of many waters."

USE: Prepare and pass out **PACK ITEM 5: 7 ARROWS OF BIBLE READING** and review the steps of good Bible study from page 10-11 in the DDG, reminding your group that daily study of Scripture is one of the best ways to grow in Christ.

ASK: (DDG p. 30)

How can we be like the Bereans? (we ought not merely hear the sermon, but also look deeper by cross-referencing passages, taking notes, and asking good questions; we should not have a posture of cynicism, but of willingness to believe the Word; because God has spoken by His Word, we ought to submit to His Word and be ready to follow what He says; we should be able to critique and correct in love any speaker who may not be teaching Scripture correctly, being true to the Word)

LIST: Write on a board, "Ways to Serve" and ask the group to look at verses 13-15 and list the different ways people served others. (believers protected Paul by sending him away; Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea to continue teaching and encouraging the church; the believers were travel guides for Paul to Athens; they were also messengers for him)

EXPLAIN: Use **verses 13-15** to explain the following idea (DDG p. 30):

Because the Bereans were eager to hear and believe, the disciples poured into these hungry souls and shared the gospel with them.

- While Paul was in Berea, those who caused trouble in Thessalonica found out where he was and created such a disturbance that Paul was forced to leave again. However, because of the importance that the apostles and early church placed on Scripture, Silas, who had accompanied Paul after the Jerusalem Council, stayed in Berea and continued to teach.
- Timothy, who had joined Paul and Silas when they arrived in his hometown (Acts 16:1), also helped teach the Bereans what the Bible said in light of Jesus's death and resurrection.
- Paul was escorted away safely to Athens, and those who helped him brought back reports to Timothy and Silas to join him there as soon as they were able.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 30)

How can we minister to others with the Word? (we can write verses as encouragement; we can lead a Bible study; we can live out the Word to lead people to Christ; we can gift someone a Bible; we can meet one on one to help others know the Word more)

TRANSITION: While the Bereans received the Word with eagerness, others were not as quick to receive the gospel. This should not cause us to stop evangelizing; rather, we need to prepare ourselves to answer people's objections so that we can point them to Christ.

POINT 2

THE GOSPEL IS DEFENDED TO THOSE WHO ARE SKEPTICAL (ACTS 17:16-18).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 17:16-18** from his or her Bible.

16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. **17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. **18** Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

EXPLAIN: Use **verses 16-18** to explain the following idea (DDG p. 30):

Paul made it his aim to reason with people who did not know the gospel but had religious leanings and questions.

- When Paul came to Athens, he was greatly disturbed by all the idols he saw. These statues of the many gods that the Athenians cherished were prominent to all who came to the city. Pausanius, who visited Athens fifty years after Paul, said it was easier to meet a god or goddess on the main streets of Athens than to meet a man.¹ Coming from Judaism and now having embraced Christ by faith, Paul's belief in one God (Deut. 6:4) would have been deeply disturbed by all of the idolatry
- Paul reasoned with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks in the synagogue and continued to appeal to those in the marketplace and anyone who would listen to him. This would have put Paul at significant risk, because an Athenian decree stipulated that anyone who initiated the people into the mysteries of foreign gods could be punished by death.² Yet Paul made it his aim to make Christ known through reasoning with those who showed an interest in spiritual matters.
- While the population in Greek and Roman cities worshiped many gods and cultural and religious tolerance were a significant reality during the Hellenistic period, the proclamation and introduction of foreign gods and cults was not a minor matter because the introduction of foreign cults and rites required the official authorization of the state.
- Reasoning with the philosophers and religiously minded, Paul found that there were some who found him to be a babbler, while others thought he was introducing a new god. Yet Paul was advocating for Jesus Christ, the God-man who had died for sinners and been raised to life.

EPICUREAN AND STOIC PHILOSOPHERS

Many types of philosophers existed during the times of the early church. Epicureans' philosophy was focused on finding peace and avoiding pain, with a belief in a distant god. Stoics believed in aligning your life to reason and the logos, the natural law, with the idea that god was in everything.

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“It would be wrong for us not to proclaim the hidden God who has revealed himself in and through Christ. Were we to stop doing so, we would be denying other people the right to revelation.”³

—Babu Immanuel Venkataraman

ASK: (DDG p. 30)

What methods should we use to reason with people who have questions about the Christian faith? (we should engage people sincerely, respectfully, and directly; we should use apologetics to defend the faith and move towards thoughtful engagement in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ; we should use science, archeology, and forensics when needed)

ENGAGE: In groups of 3-4, ask, “What are various ways to evangelize?” (sharing the gospel; sharing your testimony; showing hospitality; living out your Christian faith; serving others and imitating Christ for others to see)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine “Evangelism” in their DDG (p. 30).

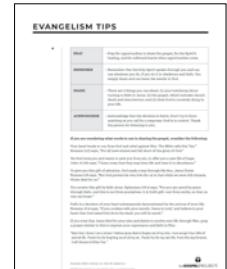
Key Doctrine #87: Evangelism: It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man’s spirit by God’s Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all thus rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 31)

From Day 2 in the DDG: **Why should evangelism be a priority in our lives and in our churches?** (evangelism, sharing the gospel, is how we grow God’s kingdom and family; if we don’t prioritize evangelism, it shows we don’t fully see the gospel as good news; if we love others as we should, sharing the joy of salvation is the best way to show it)

USE: Pass out **PACK ITEM 6: EVANGELISM TIPS** to remind and equip your group on simple steps to start evangelizing and sharing the good news when opportunities arise.

TRANSITION: As the gospel is defended when skeptics raise questions, it will provide opportunities to proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection to those who are seeking.



POINT 3

THE GOSPEL IS PROCLAIMED TO THOSE WHO ARE SEEKING (ACTS 17:19-29).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 17:19-29** from his or her Bible.

19 And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? **20** For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” **21** Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. **22** So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. **26** And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ **29** Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.”

EXPLAIN: Using **verses 19-21**, explain the following the idea (DDG p. 31):

There will always be people who are ready to listen to the gospel, whether they choose to believe or not.

- The philosophers brought Paul to the Areopagus, where he was invited to share his ideas. Luke tells us that the philosophers of Athens often gathered to hear the latest ideas. At the Areopagus, certain ideas were heard and judged to be credible or not. This informal hearing by those at the Areopagus may have been to determine if Paul could continue to speak freely or if he required censure. Regardless, Paul felt compelled to speak of Christ and had little regard for his own freedom.
- The Epicureans believed that the world was like a clock that had been wound up and then allowed to run on its own. The “gods” were detached from the universe. The Stoics believed that the creation and God had little differentiation. Paul would respond to each of these groups with the truth of Scripture.



AREOPAGUS

Scan this QR code for a more in-depth look at the history of the Areopagus.

ASK: (DDG p. 31)

What are some reasons those yet to believe would want to listen to the gospel message? (curiosity; they find it intriguing; they might only have bits and pieces and want to learn more; they might not have ever heard about it; they're open to believing if persuaded; they're looking for good news)

EXAMINE: In groups of 3-4, review verses 22-29, and list steps or skills or advice we can take from Paul's evangelistic speech. (he started out respectfully; he praised them for a characteristic they wanted to be praised for: being extremely religious; he was observant of his audience; he used a common object known by his audience, a connecting spiritual point; he proclaimed about God, the Lord of heaven and earth who gives everyone life; he recounted that God created humanity and that if we seek Him, we will find Him; he used famous sayings and common sense to connect to his theology; he tried to reason with his audience on a practical level)

HIGHLIGHT: Use **verses 22-29** to highlight the following (DDG p. 31):

When presented with an opportunity to speak about Christ, we do so with respect, reason, and a connection with our audience.

- Paul began his speech by recognizing that the people of Athens were spiritually seeking (v. 22). Paul was not conceding polytheism, but he recognized a starting connection: their professed ignorance—they did not know the one true God.
- Paul said God is the Creator of all things (v. 24). Rather than being a passive deity (Epicurean error) or being a god that is in everything (Stoic error), the true God was involved in creation and is distinct from it. Second, Paul asserted that God sustains all things (v. 25). Unlike the idols of the people, He cannot be reduced to a manageable size because all things are held together by Him and for Him (Col. 1:17).
- Third, God rules all people and is the originator of mankind (vv. 26-29). Since God gives every person life, breath, movement, and being, He is the One whom we are seeking. Therefore, the folly of idolatry is that it localizes God, makes Him dependent, limits His power and rule. Paul will go on in verse 30 to point out that God has the right to judge, which is why people should repent and turn to God.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 31)

Why do we sometimes not have more passion and intentionality to share the gospel? (fear; busyness; distracted; not on our radar; we don't fully see the impact of the gospel)

MY RESPONSE

SAY: When Paul saw an altar to an unknown god in Athens, he used it to proclaim the one true God to those who were listening. Jesus came to earth so that we might come to know God through Him, the perfect representation of God, being God Himself. Because we have come to know God through Jesus, we look in our culture for ways that we might be able to point others to the gospel so that they too might move from ignorance and disbelief to knowledge and faith in Christ.

HEAD:

When we encounter opposition to the gospel, we ought to look for creative ways to speak to the longings that people have for the deeper realities of the gospel. While we do not affirm their wrong thinking about who God is, we can affirm the hunger of their soul for the truth of Christ and His resurrection power.

What are some ways our culture allows doors to be open to speak about Christ?

HEART:

Upon seeing a city filled with idols, Paul was grieved. We need to pray that the Lord would move our hearts with compassion and grief over people who are lost and without the hope of Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. We need to ask Him to give us a boldness to proclaim Christ.

How can I have compassion for those who are without Jesus Christ?

HANDS:

As people around us are profoundly confused about spiritual realities, we can expect to have meaningful conversations with people about how Christ is the hope that they so desperately need. We can have courage to speak to their questions believing that God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ so that people would see that He is not far away.

Who is someone that needs Christ that I could pray for today?

PRAY: Father, You are a good and gracious God. Yet there are those who do not know You. There are those who are ignorant of Your grace. And there are those who mock You. Empower us to be Your servants to point them to the Way, the Truth, and the Life which is found only by embracing You in faith. I ask in Jesus's name. Amen.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"We've a message to give to the nations,
That the Lord who reigneth above
Has sent us His Son to save us,
And show us that God is love,
And show us that God is love!"⁴

—H. Ernest Nichol
(1862–1926)

EXTRA

POINT 1: THE GOSPEL IS EXPLAINED TO THOSE WHO ARE EAGER (ACTS 17:10-15).

+ COMMENTARY

"Silas and Timothy remain behind until Paul calls for them. Athens, the intellectual capital of the Greek world, was 195 miles south-southeast of Beroea (Schnabel 2004: 1170–74). Examples of such commands are prevalent in Paul's letters (Titus 3:12–13; 2 Tim. 4:21; 1 Tim. 1:3; Col. 4:10; Phil. 2:19; 1 Cor. 16:10–11; Johnson 1992: 308). Acts parallels descriptions in 1 Thess. 3:1–6 at this point. Silas and Timothy apparently arrive in Athens, although Acts does not note this; then Paul sends them back to Macedonia and does not meet up with them again until he is in Corinth (Acts 18:5). Timothy goes to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2) and Silas probably to Philippi, although that is less certain. The Acts account is selective here (Polhill 1992: 364; Conzelmann 1987: 136 says that Luke's description is 'simplified'). In sum, the pattern of preaching to mixed reaction and opposition continues, as does each local congregation's concern that Paul not be put at risk by too much controversy. The additional note here is the character of the Beroeans as willing to seek out what the Scripture teaches. The Christian life is an examined life, where one employs the Scripture like an X-ray to ascertain the nature of religious truth, life, and one's heart."⁵

+ ILLUSTRATION

How can we become like the Bereans? Three things will help us. First, listen to preaching with an open Bible. The best Bible preaching will be evident to the listener by looking at the text of Scripture being preached. You can track where the sermon is going and where the points are derived from by looking at the text of Scripture itself. The application should be rooted in the passage.

Second, don't rush from the text. It is easy to move on to everyday life after hearing the Word preached. There are other responsibilities we have to attend to and activities that call us. But a good student of the Word will review notes, go back and ask questions of the text of Scripture, and have conversations with others about the teaching from the Bible.

Third, make a plan to apply the text. After hearing the sermon, ask yourself, "What is one thing that I can apply to my life this week?" Make a note on your phone. Write it on a sticky note and put it on the mirror in your bathroom. Find a way to remember your action plan for that week. We do not want to be hearers of the Word only, but doers as well (Jas. 1:22).

EXTRA

Finally, be in the Word daily. By knowing the Bible more, you will pick up other points of application and other questions to sort out. As you read the Bible, other Scriptures will become clearer or make sense to you. The daily work of reading the Scriptures will bear itself out in countless ways throughout your life.

POINT 2: THE GOSPEL IS DEFENDED TO THOSE WHO ARE SKEPTICAL (ACTS 17:16-18).

+ COMMENTARY

"A recent very helpful and informed example of the latter approach to Paul's Areopagus speech points to the persuasive features of Paul's rhetoric; the initial point of contact seen in the fact that Paul 'begins where his audience is and builds on as much common territory as possible,' refusing to demean their belief system or to condemn their religiosity while recognizing that 'there is something genuine in their religious aspirations and felt needs.' He first addresses them "at the level of their basic worldview assumptions, creating a necessary context and foundation" for proclaiming Christ; he takes advantage of 'similarities between the Jewish Scriptures and Hellenistic thought in order to construct apologetic bridges to his listeners.' At the same time his 'deeper purpose is to confront and correct their understanding of God at a fundamental level,' achieved 'not by overtly attacking pagan doctrines, but rather by positively confessing the God of the Scriptures.'"⁶

+ OPTIONAL DISCUSSION

Many people struggle to know where to begin in evangelism. For Paul, there were two aspects that moved him upon arriving in Athens.

First, his spirit was grieved by what he saw. When we think about being witnesses for Christ, it is important that we have eyes to see the things that are causing great pain in people's lives. What aspects of unbelief are causing them sorrow, confusion and pain?

Second, Paul noticed what the people had said. On one of the altars was the inscription to "the unknown god." When we pay attention to people's lives, we will hear the stories of their "unknown gods." By asking good questions and hearing what they value and prioritize, we will be able to speak to those areas that are their hope and comfort that have let them down. Just as Paul could see the futility of worshiping images of lifeless stone and jewels, so we can see the joylessness that comes from the empty pursuits of material items—bigger houses, better cars, more vacations, and endless bills. As we engage with people and see their hunger for something that will give them meaning, identity, and purpose, we can speak to them about the Creator, who made them and sustains them by His rule and power so that they would know life forever.

POINT 3: THE GOSPEL IS PROCLAIMED TO THOSE WHO ARE SEEKING (ACTS 17:19-29).

+ **COMMENTARY**

"Although Paul was not subjected to any formal interrogation, he was asked to give an account of his teaching. One may therefore regard the situation as 'an informal inquiry by the education commission', who regarded him with 'slightly contemptuous indulgence', so that 'he might either receive the freedom of the city to preach or be censored and silenced'. Consequently, he told the court what he believed and taught, but in so doing made a quite personal statement of the gospel. As we have already seen when Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin, and as we shall see again in trial scenes in Jerusalem and Caesarea, the apostles seemed incapable of defending themselves without at the same time preaching Christ. As for Paul in Athens, it required an uncommon degree of courage to speak as he spoke, for it would be hard to imagine a less receptive or more scornful audience."⁷

+ **OPTIONAL DISCUSSION**

In the previous study, we saw how crucial the doctrine of justification by faith alone was to the early church. This was not merely an abstract doctrine, but it also had very serious implications for mission.

For the apostles to go and boldly proclaim the gospel, they rooted themselves in the deep conviction that they did not have to defend themselves first. God was their vindication. Where necessary, they would appeal for their well-being if it served gospel purposes. But at the forefront of their minds was the reality that the gospel had to go forth.

How different their mindset is than ours! The temptation to fight for "our rights" first and then proclaim the gospel after can be so tempting. There is nothing wrong to advocate for our rights and freedoms. Paul would later use his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar. But in every case, the use of rights and freedoms was to ensure that the gospel went forward.

Justification by faith alone means that because of Christ, we have been justified before the Father. We don't have to justify ourselves. We are radically free to give up our rights! Paul would make this point to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:19-23). We are already justified. Therefore, we are free to become all things to all people so that we can boldly and clearly proclaim the gospel to those who have yet to hear or believe in the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Christ comes before any rights we think we deserve or need in this world.

References

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3. Babu Immanuel Venkataraman, "Acts," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. Brian Wintle (Rajasthan, India: Open Door Publication, 2015), 1495.
4. H. Ernest Nichol, "We've a Story to Tell," *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Worship, 2008), 356.
5. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 557.
6. Schnabel, 744.
7. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 283–284.