

Gospel Conversations Part 2:

Share the Gospel

October 15, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 17:16-34

Session Outline

1. Earning a Hearing (Acts 17:16-18)
2. Finding Connection (Acts 17:19-21)
3. Speaking Truth (Acts 17:22-34)

Theological Theme

Paul's speech at Mars Hill is one of the most important in the New Testament and one of Paul's most famous. Paul showed how the message of Christ can connect with a pagan culture.



Leader Guide

Gospel Conversations Part 2: Share the Gospel

Introduction

Have you ever wanted to be Batman or Superman? Maybe you wanted to be Maverick, Captain Marvel, or Katniss Everdeen. We love stories about individuals standing up for what is right, and something in us desires to be the kind of heroes found in these stories.

Paul's speech at Mars Hill is one of the most important in the New Testament and may be Paul's most famous. We can learn a lot from this account, but Paul's primary focus wasn't on technique. Paul was not focused on winning an argument or making his unbelieving audience look dumb. The idolatry in this culture bothered Paul, and he wanted to see the men and women of Athens saved by Jesus Christ.

Very few of us will have the opportunity to engage in public debate in the way Paul did. And there is a difference in the way we should engage in a public debate and the way we engage in personal evangelism. However, we can understand how to engage with our culture and share the gospel passionately through Paul's example.

- ❓ What do you know about apologetics? Why is it important for Christian evangelism? Why is more required in evangelism than just knowing the right answers?
- ❓ In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul said love is a more excellent way. How can you defend your Christian faith with truth and love? Why is this important?

Session Summary

In the Greek language, the word *apologia* means "to make a defense." When Christians speak of *apologetics*, they reference that Greek word. Thus, an apologetic ministry focuses on defending the Christian faith. And Acts 17:16-34 is one of the most important apologetic passages in the Bible.


As Paul left Berea in Acts 17:10-26 and headed into Athens, he encountered a different culture. The rampant paganism that plagued

Athens broke Paul's heart. He reasoned in the synagogue, as was his practice, but every day outside of the Sabbath, Paul went to the marketplaces to share Christ's teaching with others.


In this apologetic encounter, Paul was not primarily focused on winning an argument. Paul wanted to win people to Jesus. Your efforts at evangelism and apologetics must never become an ego trip to win arguments. Instead, you must always be consumed with a love for Jesus and a love for the lost.

1. Earn a Hearing (Acts 17:16-18)

Paul went to Athens to wait. He was not on a mission or ministry trip in Athens; he was waiting for his traveling companions to catch up so they could head on to Corinth. While Paul waited, he went to the Synagogue to "reason" with the Jews, and he spent time in the marketplace. There, Paul was provoked, or stirred in his spirit, by the idolatry of the city.

 Do you typically have enough margin built into your life that you are willing to let God interrupt your plans for something different? Why does this matter? When has God changed your plans?

Paul loved the Lord, and he loved people. The lostness of this pagan city drove him to tell them about Jesus. As you look around your city, do you see the brokenness of the people? Do you see idolatry and need? As followers of Jesus, it can be easy to see the drastic changes in our culture and grow angry about the shifts instead of becoming broken for those who have been taken captive by idolatrous ideologies. Many of the sinful changes in American culture come about because of misplaced desires—idolatry. Rather than seeking to glorify the true and living God, people have exchanged the truth of God for lies and have chosen to bow down and serve creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1). Instead of growing angry at these people, Christians must be broken over their sin, like Paul was in this passage and as Jesus was for the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37).

 How does your life give evidence that you love the unbelievers you encounter? If it doesn't, what might need to change?

As Paul looked around in Athens, he was angered, sad, broken, and motivated. He ministered in the synagogue, but he didn't stay there. Paul didn't earn his invitation to the Areopagus in the synagogue or other religious environments; he received his invitation to speak at Mars Hill because he went out from the synagogue. In the marketplace, Paul met

people and told them about Jesus. In the marketplace, people discovered Paul was interested in them and in their lives. Paul didn't go to the marketplace to buy or sell but to share the gospel.



Application: Evangelism requires intention and effort. Where do you go or what do you practice regularly with a desire to open doors to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others?

Paul shared freely with all sorts of people. He spoke to the Jews, the Epicureans, the stoics, and other people in the market who just came to buy and sell. Paul did not demand to be set in front of the people at the Areopagus. He met people where they were and earned the right to be heard. Evangelism and apologetics should be driven by love, not a desire to win arguments. Increasingly, we will have to earn the right to be heard. Paul spent time with the people of Athens, and as a result, they were willing to hear more of what he had to say.

2. Finding Connection (Acts 17:19-21)


Remember, Paul went marketplace because he could meet people there. But Paul found other points of connection too. Athens was a city of learning, where “all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new” (v. 21). Paul was a teacher, and he had a message to share. And he connected with his hearers intellectually by sharing the message of Jesus.



How was Paul uniquely qualified to connect with the philosophers of Athens? How did God use those things in this setting?


Instead of being sullen or combative, Paul used the marketplace to explain his own beliefs about Jesus Christ. The culture of free exchange allowed Paul to be heard, agreed with, or disagreed with based on the merits of his ideas and the response of his audience. While many rejected Paul, others wanted to hear more. The culture in Athens allowed for that. We too live in a pluralistic society, where many ideas exist side by side. Like Paul, we can use our cultural climate to engage others with the gospel.

Your points of connection will probably not be the same as Paul's. You likely don't regularly encounter Epicurean or Stoic philosophers—and that's okay. Paul was educated as a Jewish leader and as such was well-qualified to engage in deep conversations with the philosophers of Athens. Your points of connection may be the place you work, the school your children attend, or the sports team you cheer for.

-  What things are you passionate about? How might you use your hobbies or other passions as vehicles to share the gospel?

The great truth to take away from Paul's ministry in Athens is not that you must minister the same way Paul did. The truth is you can minister with the same passion as Paul in the places where God sends you. Remember, Paul was in Athens waiting on people, and God had a special mission and purpose for him in that place. God has a purpose for you in the places He sends you also. You may believe you are simply waiting in a checkout line or watching a little league baseball game, but God may have bigger plans.


Look around at the people God puts you in contact with and seek a heart of compassion. Just as Paul was broken by the idolatry of Athens, consider how you need to be broken for those around you, looking for a point of connection that might open the door to ministry.

-  Application: Name some people you encounter on a regular basis who don't have a relationship with Jesus. What do you have in common that could be used as a point of connection?

3. Speaking Truth (Acts 17:22-34)

Paul put himself in a place where he could minister, and he observed of the culture around him. He spoke to the Athenians of their religious convictions and of their various idols, but he pointed specifically to "The unknown God."

Commentators and theologians for the past two thousand years have spilled much ink debating and theorizing about the identity of the unknown God. Many have suggested that Paul was telling them that this "unknown God" was the true God who was revealed in Christ. Some have suggested that Paul was merely pointing to the fact that the Athenians were so committed to idols made by human hands that they even made an extra one to the "unknown God" just in case they missed one.

-  How do the idols of our culture look different than those in ancient times? What are the greatest idolatrous struggles within the church today? How might the idolatry of Christians hamper their ability to effectively communicate the gospel with others?

Paul did not give as much clarification as we might want. Why? For Paul the idol to the "unknown God" was merely a pivot point to get from the Athenian's paganism to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul could have spent

The Areopagus

Paul's speech on the Areopagus is a masterpiece of missionary preaching. Paul sought to establish as much rapport with the Greek philosophers as possible without compromising the gospel.

hours debating and pontificating about the idols of Athens, but he was not primarily concerned with idols. Paul was focused on Jesus, and he moved to the truth about Jesus as quickly as he could.

Paul might have enjoyed longer debates with the philosophers and students of Athens, but he refused to get lost in the margins. When he went to the Corinthians, Paul said he “decided to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). He carried the same singular focus up Mars Hill. He spoke to them about Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. Some people mocked Paul, but he spoke the truth anyway.



What kinds of marginal debates can distract Christians from the message of the gospel?

As culture increasingly turns against Christianity, it can be easy for Christians to get lost in debates over politics or culture. There are many important issues that Christians need to be certain about, but an argument about politics is not as important as the gospel. Whether it’s who you voted for or what college team you prefer, refuse to get lost in the margins. Speak the truth of the gospel first. The other things can wait, but the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

Finally, as you consider the need to speak the truth, always call for a response. This may not be formal every time—you will not do an altar call to share the gospel with your flight attendant. You might not even always get to ask someone if they want to be saved today. But you can always try to continue the conversation. Share as much about Jesus as you can, and then ask for another conversation in the future. Seek to deepen your relationships. When you can, leave your evangelism encounters on a good note and try to get some contact info to continue the conversation. The response may not be a yes to Jesus today, maybe just a yes to a future conversation.



Application: Who is God calling you to seek a gospel conversation with? How might you move toward obedience?

Conclusion

Paul’s ministry gained enough notice that he was invited to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the site for debate, teaching, religious instruction, and even governing in the ancient city of Athens. The Areopagus was located on Mars Hill—a hill named after the Roman god of war, Mars. On Mars Hill, Paul reasoned with the philosophers and teachers of Athens, but his message was very different than the message he taught to the Jews.

With the Jews, Paul began with the Messiah. With the Greeks and Romans, Paul had to begin with creation itself. Paul referred to the paganism of Rome by noting the various public altars and pointing them beyond their “Unknown God” to the true God of the Scriptures. Paul could not begin with the Old Testament law or even with the Messiah because these concepts were unknown to the people of Athens.

Most importantly, Paul still proclaimed the gospel. In fact, it was not until Paul began to speak about the resurrection of the dead that the Greeks began to ridicule him. But some said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” Paul did not win everyone to Christ, but the gospel seeds he planted opened doors for more ministry in the future.

- ❓ How might Christians have to share about Jesus differently today than thirty years ago? What has changed in culture that requires us to shift the way we share the gospel?
- ❓ Why might it be necessary for Christians in twenty-first-century Nashville to begin their gospel presentations with creation rather than with Jesus?
- ❓ We don’t know much about the receptivity of the Jews in Athens, but Jews in other cities were offended because the gospel of Jesus didn’t fit their preconceived expectations. What can make the gospel offensive to the people of our city today? How can we seek to overcome hesitations to offending others with the gospel message?

Prayer of Response

Close in prayer thanking God for the good news of the gospel. Ask Him to help you spread His message to all you meet.

Additional Resources

- *Sharing the Gospel with Ease* by Thom Rainer
- *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel
- *Before You Share Your Faith* by Matt Smethurst

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Don't Just Go to Church—Be the Church

Main Passages

- Colossians 3:12-17

Session Outline

1. Let Peace Rule (Colossians 3:12-15)
2. Praise the Lord (Colossians 3:16)
3. Make a Difference (Colossians 3:17)

Memorize

“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.” - Acts 17:30-31

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 17:16-34

17:16 While waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive from Berea, Paul observed Athens closely. He saw that it was full of idols. Athens was a beautiful city with many magnificent buildings and other monuments, many of them related to pagan worship (e.g., the Parthenon). The city was also a center of intellectual, philosophical, and religious discussion. All of this deeply distressed Paul as a person who knew the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ.

17:17 Paul followed his custom and reasoned in the synagogue, but also expanded his audience even before the onset of trouble from the Jews, by taking the gospel to the marketplace and engaging whoever was there, likely including philosophers, rhetoricians, and teachers.

17:18 Epicurean and Stoic philosophers comprised two of the best-known philosophical schools of thought. Epicureans taught that one ought to lead a tranquil and contemplative life, free of passions and destructive emotions. They didn't deny the existence of gods but believed they were indifferent to humanity. Stoics were pantheists and believed the divine principle was found everywhere. Humans ought to live by reason, the divine principle within them, so as to achieve a virtuous life. Epicureans and Stoics attracted many followers who gathered in various parts of the city to discuss the leading issues of the day. In their arrogance, some of them depicted Paul as an ignorant show-off. This was actually a slang term that meant "seed-picker."

17:19–21 The Areopagus was a rocky hill in Athens overlooking the marketplace. The word Aeropagus was also used to refer to the council that originally met on the hill. During Hellenistic times, the council probably met in the agora—or marketplace. The Greek text here is ambiguous. So it could be that Paul gave an address on the hilltop or that he appeared before this Athenian council elsewhere. The term Areopagus means "hill of Ares." Ares, the Greek god of war, was equivalent to the Roman god, Mars. So the hilltop was also known as Mars Hill.

17:22–31 This is Paul's third and final missionary speech in the book of Acts. He appealed to the Athenians' religious inclinations, drew upon observable data from nature to discuss the attributes of God, marshaled insights from pagan poets, and identified God and the need for humans to repent in preparation for the day in which God will judge the world in righteousness through Jesus Christ, whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead.

17:22–23 As an example of Athenian superstition, Paul noted the altar erected To an Unknown God. No such inscription has been found, but it is no surprise that such an altar existed. Doubtless it was erected to ensure that no gods were overlooked (and thus angered) in the people's devotion.

17:24–29 Paul's argument from nature included a basic natural theology: God is Creator of all things; God is beyond the human realm (transcendent); God is not obligated to any human; God is sovereign over all peoples; God as Creator is quantitatively different from his creation.

17:27 Paul did not believe a person could achieve salvation through his own search for God (v. 30), but he did believe God is near to each person and that people through their own reasoning and observation of nature can achieve rudimentary knowledge of who God is. Special revelation from God is necessary for fuller understanding and salvation (see Rm 10:14–15).

17:28 Paul quoted (For we are also his offspring) someone whom these philosophers would have recognized—a Greek poet named Aratus who lived about 315–240 BC.

17:30–31 Paul built upon his argument from natural theology by introducing an eschatological dimension. God had overlooked the times of ignorance, but now commands humanity to acknowledge its evil ways and turn from them (repent). He has established a day of judgment on which the world will be held accountable to the righteous standard set by Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

17:32–33 Neither Stoics nor Epicureans believed in the possibility of bodily resurrection, though the Stoics did believe the human spirit continued to exist after bodily death. In any event, Paul’s talk about bodily resurrection earned him ridicule but also a measure of curiosity.

17:34 Paul’s missionary efforts in Athens were not as successful as they were elsewhere since he founded no church there. But there were a number of converts. These included a member of the Areopagus, Dionysius, a man of distinction because of this prestigious membership. Damaris may also have been a woman of distinction since Luke bothered to name her (vv. 4–5).¹

References

1. Stanley E. Porter, “Acts,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1750–1751.

Author Bio

Thom Rainer (Sharing the Gospel with Ease)

Thom S. Rainer is the founder and CEO of Church Answers, an online community and resource for church leaders. Prior to founding Church Answers, Rainer served as president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources. Before coming to Lifeway, he served at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for twelve years where he was the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism. He is a 1977 graduate of the University of Alabama and earned his Master of Divinity and Ph.D. degrees from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Rainer and his wife, Nellie Jo, have three grown sons and ten grandchildren. He is the author of more than two dozen books, including *I Am a Church Member*, *Breakout Churches*, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, *Who Moved My Pulpit?*, and *Anatomy of a Revived Church*.

Lee Strobel (The Case for Christ)

Lee Strobel was the award-winning legal editor of *The Chicago Tribune* and is the bestselling author of *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Christ Devotional*, *The Case for Christianity Answer Book*, *The Case for Faith*, *The Case for a Creator*, *The Case for Miracles*, and *The Miracles Answer Book*. With a journalism degree from the University of Missouri and a Master of Studies in Law degree from Yale, Lee has won four Gold Medallions for publishing excellence and coauthored the *Christian Book of the Year*. Lee is President of the Lee Strobel Center for Evangelism and Applied Apologetics at Colorado Christian University. Visit Lee's website at: leestrobel.com.

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