

The Church Is United in Love

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God calls His people to love the people around them and build bridges with them to share the gospel.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Acts 15:36–18:22

The Roman Empire was a religiously pluralistic empire. The Roman authorities had no problem with multiple religions and regional faiths. They were tolerant of groups and sects so long as they also were willing to worship the Roman gods and honor the Roman emperors.

We too live in a religiously pluralistic society, where you may worship whomever you please and “all roads lead to heaven.” What is not tolerated in this “age of tolerance,” however, is the exclusive message of the gospel, namely, that there is salvation in no other name but Jesus (Acts 4:12). If we are to share the gospel in this culture, we need to do the hard work of constructing a Christian worldview carefully and methodically because many in our culture have no clue who Jesus really is and what it means to be His follower.



What do you find most difficult about sharing the gospel in today's culture?

Group Time

Point 1: A heart is burdened for others (Acts 17:16-21).

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, “What is this ignorant show-off 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.

¹⁹ They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, “May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? ²⁰ Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

No matter where Paul found himself, he kept sharing the gospel. As was his custom, he went to the local Jewish synagogue first, and then he would preach to the Gentiles (17:2,17). In Athens, Paul had a unique motivation for his evangelism—he was distressed in his heart because he was in a city full of idols. He was surrounded by a city full of deceived people, and he became jealous for the glory of the Lord. When anything or anyone steals God’s glory, we should be jealous for God alone to receive glory and worship. This should also be our fuel for evangelism and missions.

Evangelism: It is the duty and _____ of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make _____ of all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by _____ witness undergirded by a Christian _____.

Because Paul’s gospel is our gospel, it too will sound strange in a religiously pluralistic culture. It sounds strange because, unlike man-made religion and philosophy, God Himself takes the action to save humanity. It sounds strange because it argues for an exclusive path to God: faith alone in the crucified and resurrected Jesus alone. Still, some people will be open to hearing us out, just as they were with Paul.



What are some of the challenges to sharing the gospel where you live and work?

Point 2: A point of contact is made (Acts 17:22-29).

²² Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. ²³ 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. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. ²⁵ Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is 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 also his offspring.’ ²⁹ Since we are 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.

Before Paul explained the gospel to the Athenians, he took some time to construct a Christian worldview using accessible terminology. Paul began by establishing a point of contact (v. 22). Instead of beginning with condemnation—“You’re all going to hell for idolatry!”—he began by acknowledging their religious desires. The work of constructing a Christian worldview is not “angry work.” It’s slow, hard work.

 What truths are fundamental to a Christian worldview?

Paul didn’t only present a Christian worldview; he also worked to tear down the confused, incorrect, false worldviews of his hearers. By presenting the biblical view of God as the one true God, Paul directly confronted the Athenians’ ideas about their gods. He did not use the statue to the “unknown god” to lead them to think they were already worshiping the true God in ignorance. He used the statue to introduce them to a radically new understanding of God, the “I AM” of the Hebrew Scriptures.

 What are some tenets of false worldviews that must crumble to see the glory of God in Christ?

Voices from the Church

“The challenge of worldview evangelism is not to make simple things complicated but to make clear to others some fairly complicated things that we simply assume.”¹

—D. A. Carson

Point 3: The gospel is proclaimed (Acts 17:30-34).

³⁰ “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, 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.”

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this.” ³³ So Paul left their presence. ³⁴ However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul began with the God who creates and sustains all things, and he closed with the God who judges through His appointed man—Jesus, His Son whom He raised from the dead. All the preparatory work of building and tearing down that Paul did was to get to Christ. Though the Athenians were ignorant of the one true God, He had not judged them yet, as they would have feared from their own gods. Why? Because God is a God of mercy, and in His patience, He has now called all peoples to repent.

When we tell people about Jesus, we must also call for a response. If you’re concerned with how people will respond to you when you share Christ, just look at how they responded to Paul. Some remained skeptical and likely rejected the gospel. Some were curious, however, and asked to hear more about what Paul was sharing. And finally, some with whom Paul shared the gospel believed. It may take some time and some effort and difficult work to be faithful to God’s call, but trust the Lord for fruitfulness.



What are some ways the Christian worldview and the gospel, in particular, help make sense of the world and provide meaningful hope for people?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Acts 15:36–16:40

Did you know that the number one reason missionaries leave the field is interpersonal conflict with other missionaries? This may surprise you, but missions is stressful. In Acts 15:36, Paul approached Barnabas and suggested a mission strategy: revisit the brothers and sisters in every town from their first missionary journey to see how they were doing. Though they were unified in the plan, Paul and Barnabas were divided over the personnel (v. 37). Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark, but Paul did not trust him because John Mark had already abandoned them once (v. 38). Luke wrote, “They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company” (v. 39).

This is a helpful reminder that sometimes brothers and sisters can genuinely disagree and not sin. But it’s also an instructive example for how to disagree with brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul spoke of Barnabas in other places, and he still held him in high regard (1 Cor. 9:6; Col. 4:10). Why? Because he knew their unity was rooted in Christ and His gospel (Acts 15:6-11).

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas is sad, even if not sinful. Still, we should notice that it did not stand in the way of Jesus building His church. In fact, as a result of their disagreement, two mission teams went out instead of one: Barnabas and John Mark (v. 39) and Paul and Silas (v. 40). And the mission continued (v. 41).



What are some guidelines for how Christians should handle disagreements with one another?

Day 2: Read Acts 17:1-21

As we share the gospel, we need to understand up front that some people will receive the message (vv. 1-4) while others will reject it (vv. 5-9). Regardless of the response, we learn from Paul how to continue sharing the gospel clearly, winsomely, and compellingly. Notice how Paul shared the gospel.

He “*reasoned* with them from the Scriptures” (v. 2, emphasis mine). Sharing the gospel requires words, but also notice the source of Paul’s words: the Scriptures. How did Paul *reason* from the Scriptures? *Explaining* and *proving* (v. 3). The word *explain* means “to open” (cf. Luke 24:45; Acts 16:14). We can’t open people’s hearts like Jesus can, but we can open up the Scriptures in a way that people can understand them, *proving* from the Scriptures who Jesus is.

 How does it encourage you in your evangelism to know that the same gospel produces opposite results: reception and rejection?

Day 3: Read Acts 17:22-29

As you read Acts 17:22-29, try to identify Paul’s method of sharing the gospel. What do you notice? Do you see how he began where they were, making a personal point of contact in verses 22-23? Because the Athenians were ignorant of the Hebrew Scriptures and of Jesus, the promised Messiah, Paul had to present a Christian worldview by finding common notions and using accessible terms.

Paul thus began with the doctrine of God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things (vv. 24-26). Then he moved to the doctrine of humanity and our universal human longing, which is why the Athenians were so religious (vv. 27-29). When sharing the gospel, it’s important to understand with whom you’re talking and to begin where they are. That’s what Paul did. That’s what we need to do as well.

 How does the way Paul presented a Christian worldview for the unbelieving Athenians encourage you to consider or reconsider how you share the gospel?

Day 4: Read Acts 17:30-34

In the previous reading, we took note of how Paul presented a Christian worldview beginning with the doctrine of God as the foundation for the gospel. All the “build up” was to provide a context by which the Athenians could understand who Jesus is and why they needed Him. The reason for the “forest” of idols in Athens was that they were afraid of the wrath of the gods. Unlike their gods, who seem to get mad for no reason whatsoever, the one true God is a God of mercy. He overlooked “the times of ignorance,” but once the Athenians had heard the gospel, God commanded them to repent (v. 30). Yet to be clear, ignorance is not a valid excuse for our sin or lack of faith. God is patient for people to come to salvation, but we are all justly condemned apart from Christ (Rom. 1:18-23; 2 Pet. 3:15)

Again, notice the varied responses. Some mocked Paul, but others said, “We’d like to hear from you again about this” (v. 32). And still others believed (v. 34).



How does seeing Paul’s example of sharing the gospel encourage you in your own evangelistic efforts?

Day 5: Read Acts 18:1-22

What keeps you from sharing the gospel with the unbelieving people in your life? Fear? When you’re afraid, take comfort in the sovereignty of God in salvation. This passage is encouraging because it reminds us that even the apostle Paul had times when he was afraid to share the gospel (v. 9)

There are three notable promises found in verse 10: (1) “I am with you”; (2) “no one will lay a hand on you to hurt you”; and (3) “I have many people in this city.” Now, the second promise is unique to Paul in this situation. We’re not promised safety every time we share the gospel. Yet we are promised that Jesus will be with us (Matt. 28:20). Finally, notice the basis for encouragement to evangelize: the sovereignty of the Lord—“I have many people in this city.”



How does it encourage you in your evangelism to know that Jesus is sovereign over salvation and that He will save sinners?

