



11

SESSION ELEVEN

The Gospel Meets Culture

SESSION SUMMARY

We should pay careful attention to how Paul interacted with the men and women of Athens since this has many parallels for us today. Paul understood that the gospel must be presented in a way that is easy for people in different cultures to understand. As a result, when Paul reasoned with those in Athens, he found points of contact between the biblical view of the world and that of Greek culture. Then, he proclaimed that all nations came from the first Adam and that the second Adam—Jesus Christ—would judge all nations. Paul’s message focused on the risen Jesus and included a fervent call to repentance. We need to allow ourselves to be distressed by the idolatry of our culture like Paul was so we can boldly and sensitively proclaim the gospel into it. By the end of this session, we will discover what it means to be in the world but not of it.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 17:16-33

THE POINT

The gospel must be presented in a way that is easy for people in different cultures to understand.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Throughout the history of the church, we read about people who believed the world was so evil that they had to get away and separate themselves as much as possible. These kinds of people are often called *ascetics*. As a result, many lived in the desert and created monastic communities where they could guard themselves from the idolatries in the culture. There were even some who believed their bodies were such a source of temptation and evil that they would *mortify* their bodies—meaning, they would inflict pain on themselves to discipline themselves to not do certain things.

Over the years, many people have had different opinions about how Christians should relate to their surrounding culture. Some have said to avoid it, as in the case of the ascetics. Some have also wrongly suggested the opposite approach of completely immersing oneself within the culture. However, for Christians, the proper response should be one of engagement; we engage culture in hopes of transforming others into the likeness of Christ. We aren't meant to run from culture or consume it entirely, but to live in it in such a way that we can be salt and light to those around us—the very thing we see in our study today of Acts 17.

- **What are some ways Christians can engage their culture with the Christian worldview?**

Option 2

In some cultures, eye contact is seen as negative, but it is a sign of respect or professionalism in others. Some cultures are more expressive with their hands and body language, others with facial expressions, and others with words. Some cultures prize individualism, and others thrive by relying on their communities. Parents in some cultures choose a spouse for their children, while other cultures allow their children to choose who they wish to marry. Other things in culture, like the appropriate age for someone to finish school or get married or the familiarity with which elders and strangers are addressed vary greatly.

- **What are some differences you've noticed in the way different people in your area go about their lives?**
- **What are some cultural differences you've noticed in your own travels or studies?**

All cultures, and even families within those cultures, have unique beliefs and experiences. As Christians, it is important to recognize these beliefs and the ways these beliefs and experiences may affect the way others will hear or understand the gospel. Christians should be prepared to find common ground and build from there in an explanation of the gospel.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

The gospel must be presented in a way that easy for people in different cultures to understand.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** also known by his Hebrew name Saul; violent persecutor turned follower and apostle of Christ; known as the missionary to the Gentiles

PLOT

This session is filled with what might be called “evangelistic strategy.” The Book of Acts contains several evangelistic encounters, in which the gospel message was preached and received (or rejected). However, this session’s encounter takes place in a culture not too different from our own in many respects.

TIMELINE

ENGAGING CULTURE

Paul engages the surrounding culture with the message of Christ.

LIVING ON MISSION

Paul viewed his day-to-day work as an opportunity to spread the gospel.

**Beginning in Spring 2018*

STANDING STRONG

Refuse compromise when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

PAUL GRIEVED FOR THE LOST

After preaching and proclaiming the gospel in a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul found himself in Athens, an intellectual and religious center filled with idols.

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. (Acts 17:16)

Paul had experience in cities where people worshiped idols, but Athens was on another level. This is why we read that Paul was troubled by the sight of a city so deep in idolatry. Paul was not troubled the way you might be troubled when you realize you forgot to study for an exam. Paul was not fearful of the idols or the amount of them in the city. Paul was more grieved that there were so many idols in the city. This provoked him to stop waiting for Silas and the others to join him and to begin sharing the gospel in the synagogue and the marketplace.

How did Paul know the city was full of idols in the first place? Did he read the latest travel guide for Athens? Did he read a brochure in the town's welcome center? Or did he research the city online?

No, Paul studied the city. He walked around and observed the culture. He became aware of his surroundings. Instead of running away, closing his eyes, or returning to a "safer" city, Paul allowed himself to grieve over the idolatry in Athens. He allowed the Holy Spirit to move his heart, creating the foundation for what he did next.

- **What are some "idols" you see in our culture today?** (*p. 78, PSG*)
- **What is your response to seeing how many idols our culture has? What can you do to help turn people toward Jesus?** (*p. 78, PSG*)

PAUL STUDIED THEIR CULTURE AND PROCLAIMED THE TRUTH TO THEM

Once the Lord grieved Paul's heart and opened his eyes to see the idolatry and the lost in the city, Paul stopped waiting around for Silas and the others to join him. Instead, he got up and went to both the synagogue and the marketplace to reason with the Jewish and Greek Athenians. He taught the gospel to them in a way they would understand.

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 babblers wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 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. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”(Acts 17:17-31)

When Paul reasoned with the Athenians, he did not expect them to come to faith the way he did—by first becoming devout Jews and then Christians. Instead, he started with their worldview and with what they knew. Then, he laid a foundation for sharing the gospel with them.

Paul began by applauding the Athenians for wanting to explore and seek the truth since they gave him the opportunity to talk about the gospel to a large group of them (v. 20). After Paul was taken into the Areopagus to explain his message to them, he started his speech by affirming the good. He then commended them for being religious and for understanding that life was more than the here and now. At this point he made the transition from their culture’s idea of the divine to biblical truth, commenting on the unknown god they worshiped ignorantly and teaching them the truth about who God was.

Paul wanted to acknowledge that he understood where the Athenians were coming from before he shared the gospel with them. He wanted to explain that he was not ignorant about their ways before critiquing their beliefs. Instead of introducing a god they had never heard about, he pointed out the fact that they already knew something was missing in their belief system. After all, why would they have an altar with the inscription “To an Unknown God”?

From there, Paul built toward sharing the gospel with the Athenians. Notice the way he did it. He started by sharing how man-made idols are not necessary. After all, why would anyone want to worship a god they could make? In other words, he proclaimed the existence and self-sufficiency of the God of Scripture.

Paul rebuked the plethora of idols throughout Athens, saying that they were useless and meaningless. Instead, the real divine nature is both holy and above us, all-knowing and all-powerful, personal and intimate. This is the type of God the Athenians truly wanted and were deeply seeking.

The same is true for us today in the twenty-first century. As cliché as it might sound, there is a hole in each of our hearts that only God can satisfy and fill. The world tries to convince us we can satisfy ourselves by filling that hole with idols of our own making like sex, fame, money, possessions, drugs, and alcohol. But this never works. These are simply our modern day shrines. The only thing that will truly satisfy is the true and living God who created and sustains the world, not the idols of the human imagination.

PAUL ENCOUNTERED DIFFERENT FEEDBACK TO HIS MESSAGE

When Paul affirmed the good in their culture, this opened the door for him to rebuke the bad, and ultimately proclaim the truth of the gospel to the Athenians.

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” 33 So Paul went out from their midst. (Acts 17:32-33)

The Athenians’ response varied. Some people ridiculed him because resurrection was such a strange concept in their culture. When you share the gospel with those who are far from God, you need to give the results to God (1 Cor. 3:5-9). The best response to those who reject, ridicule, or laugh is to end the conversation and begin interceding for them. Pray that God would soften their hearts to the truth of the gospel and that He would change them.

When you share the gospel with others, you will encounter some who want to continue the discussion and ask more questions, just like some of the Athenians. In situations like these, allow them to ask questions and do your best to answer. If you do not know an answer, then find it out together with them. Let the process be a part of the journey, but always start and end with a study of the Scriptures. God’s truth will guide your way and the conversation.

TIMELINE

UNITY IN THE CROSS

Believers are united together in Christ.

SHOWING MERCY

Those who know mercy show mercy to others.

A NEW IDENTITY

Peter reminds God's people of their identity in Christ.

If you faithfully and consistently share the gospel with others, you will possibly see God transform many individuals. When this happens, make sure they are part of a local church that can disciple them from the start. Invite them into your Bible study, help them become involved in the life of the church, and meet with them one-on-one.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Evangelism (p. 80, PSG)

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. Therefore, missionary effort from all believers rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in Jesus' teachings. 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 supported by a Christian lifestyle.

CHRIST CONNECTION

When Paul reasoned with the men in Athens, he found points in common between the biblical view of the world and the Greek culture. Then, he explained that all nations came from the first Adam and that all nations will be judged by the second Adam (Jesus Christ). His message focused on the risen Jesus and included a fervent call to repentance.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How does Paul's boldness in addressing the Athenian philosophers challenge you in your own mission of sharing the gospel?** *Answers may include things like: being bolder in sharing the gospel, being ready for different responses, trying to use what the person knows to talk about the gospel with him or her, and so forth.*
- **Scripture says, as children of God, we are to live in the world but not be of it (John 17:14,16). What does this mean for us today?** *We are to engage with others as a normal rhythm of life, but not conform to the ways of the world while doing so.*
- **Though God may ultimately be in charge of growing the fruit from our sowing and watering, this does not excuse us from planting a lot of seeds. How can you make sharing the gospel a part of your everyday life and regular rhythms?** *We can look for conversation starters like Paul did, build friendships, ask meaningful questions, and so forth.*
- **When people believe the gospel and come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, what should their next steps be? How should discipleship take place? What should they begin learning?** *Next steps should include getting them plugged into a local church, inviting them to participate in regular Bible study, teaching them the practice of spiritual disciplines, and so on.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

John Bunyan once said, “It is wounding work...this breaking of the hearts, but without wounding there is no saving...Conversion is not the smooth, easy-going process some men seem to think.”¹¹ Like Paul, Bunyan understood that evangelism involves more than repeating a few memorized lines. Evangelism also takes studying the culture around you to understand the best strategy to use in communicating the truth with others.

- **How might we use things within our culture (movies, music, internet, etc.) to reach people where they are?** *There are a number of mediums within our culture we can easily use to share the gospel with others. Whether it’s a popular movie or a song that talks about what is good or living right, there are all sorts of opportunities Christians have to ask questions and take the conversation further with our friends.*
- **Why is it important that we study our culture in order to make an impact for Christ within it?** *By studying and knowing the culture, we are in a better position to transform it with the message of Christ. Not only that, but it also shows that we truly care about the people around us.*



HEART

Like the Athenians, we also have an idol issue in modern day culture. It may not look the same with physical sculptures we bow down to and revere, but there are idols all around us nonetheless—many of these being hidden deep within our hearts. As Kyle Idleman says, “Idolatry isn’t just one of many sins; rather it’s the one great sin that all others come from. So if you start scratching at whatever struggle you’re dealing with, eventually you’ll find that underneath it is a false god. Until that god is dethroned, and the Lord God takes his rightful place, you will not have victory. Idolatry isn’t *an* issue; it is *the* issue.”¹²

- **Is your city full of idols? What would you say that they are?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some of the heart idols you are struggling with? How does the gospel challenge your allegiance to them?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Sadly, there are many Christians today who know what the gospel is, but fail to share it with others. However, the gospel is not only for knowing but also for sharing. So, pray for the lost in your neighborhood and at school. Engage with them, develop friendships with them, and look for opportunities to share the gospel with them through words and actions.

- **How do you begin spiritual conversations with your friends, neighbors, and family members who are far from God? Share some examples.** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does a repentant life display the work of the gospel to a lost world? How do you live a life of repentance?** *It shows that we are broken by sin and in need of forgiveness and grace.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life Times and Work* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 389.
2. Kyle Idleman, *Gods at War: Defeating the Idols that Battle for Your Heart* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 22.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPMissionWin18)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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