

SESSION 5

Share the Message



QUESTION 1:

What are some topics you're always ready to talk about?

THE POINT

Our daily conversations are opportunities to share Christ.

THE PASSAGES

Acts 17:16-18,22-23,30-31

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

I used to ride a commuter train to school. I was also a new Christian, and I looked forward to that forty-five-minute ride as a time to read and study my Bible. On one occasion, a woman sat down next to me while my Bible was open on my lap, and she kept peering over at what I was doing.

This irritated me. This nosy woman was interrupting my Bible study time! I shifted slightly away from her, but she only leaned in further. Finally, I stopped reading, placed my hand over the open Bible, and looked directly at her. She certainly noticed that.

After an awkward moment, I was convicted to engage in conversation. I remembered that my morning prayer had been for God to give me an opportunity to share Jesus with someone. That opportunity was now right beside me, and I almost missed it because I was so focused on my own time with the Lord.

We have “windows of opportunity” every day to share Jesus, but we can easily miss them. Jesus wants to tell His story through us. We need to be ready to share.

Acts 17:16-18

16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.

17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

KEY WORDS: **Epicureans** (v. 18)—A philosophical school which held that life’s chief purpose was to indulge in pleasure and happiness, while avoiding pain, passions, superstition, and anxiety. **Stoicks** (v. 18)—Philosophical school which emphasized rational thought, self-reliance, and living in harmony with the natural world.

Paul had a “window of opportunity” in Athens. This opportunity came with his grief over the godlessness he observed. Paul noticed an air of spiritualism that had nothing to do with God. Though the people were engaged in worship, it was pagan and idolatrous.

QUESTION 2:

When you look at culture today, what causes you to be distressed and recognize that people need Jesus?

Paul wisely handled this opportunity by first engaging “with the Jews, and with the devout persons,” since he was most familiar with them. This was his customary practice as he regularly taught in the synagogue. Whenever Paul entered a new city, he began by reaching out to the Jews and the worshiping Gentiles. Every Sabbath he sought them out at the local synagogue. The Jews didn’t

know Christ, but they knew about God. Paul could use the ancient prophecies as a basis for his teaching, and his audience could follow his reasoning. Both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles already had a sincere interest in God, and Paul could tap into that as he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Between Sabbaths, Paul could be found among the people in the marketplace in Athens—the Agora—engaging in conversations. In this marketplace, he met two types of thinkers:

1. **Epicurean philosophers** believed the purpose of life was in finding pleasure and eliminating pain. They thought that God, if He existed at all, was not involved in our lives. Furthermore, they did not believe in life after death.
2. **Stoic philosophers** were pantheists, believing in an ultimate divine principle that exists throughout the universe and nature, including human beings. They believed the way to realize your fullest potential was to live by reason. They valued self-sufficiency. The Stoics believed they could eliminate suffering through intellectual perfection.

Here in the cultural and intellectual center of the Roman Empire, where Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle had once taught, and where intellectuals still loved to debate, Paul dove right into the discussion with philosophers who were worlds apart from him in their beliefs. These philosophers made fun of Paul, labeling him a “babbling,” but Paul saw an opportunity before Him.

Though circumstances may not appear favorable for sharing Christ, we need to look for the opportunity “hiding” in those circumstances. In our post-Christian culture, many people are not excited about discussing the gospel. Some may want to discuss philosophy, but not “obsolete religion.” How do we see the opportunity? It begins with prayer. We can ask the Lord to prepare our hearts with the compassion of Christ, prepare our minds with knowledge of the Word, give us the discernment to see where the opportunity lies, and prepare our spirits with bold power from the

DIGGING DEEPER

PAUL'S SERMON IN ATHENS

Paul's brief visit to Athens is a centerpiece for the entire book of Acts. The scene revolves around Paul's famous address before the Areopagus (vv. 22-31). This is preceded by an introductory narrative that portrays the "Athenian scene" in vivid local color (vv. 16-21). Although there were several converts, Luke did not dwell on this or mention the establishment of a church in Athens. It would be a mistake, however, to see Paul's Athenian experience as a "maverick" episode. The opposite is true. The central item, the speech on the Areopagus, is the prime example in Acts of Paul's preaching to Gentiles. In the following narrative Paul works among Gentiles for eighteen months in Corinth and for nearly three years in Ephesus, but no example of his preaching is given. The reason quite

simply is that it has already been given—in Athens, in the very center of Gentile culture and intellect.

Athens was known the world over for its magnificent art and architecture. The art, however, characteristically portrayed the exploits of the various gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon, and most of the impressive buildings were temples to the pagan gods. For Paul, with his strong monotheism and distaste for graven images, the scene was most unappealing. The NIV is too gentle in saying that he was "greatly distressed" (v. 16). The Greek word Luke used is much stronger. Paul was "infuriated" at the sight. Ancient descriptions testify that the marketplace was virtually lined with idols. For Paul a thing of beauty was not a joy forever, particularly when it embodied so distorted a view of divinity.

John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 of The New American Commentary, David S. Dockery, gen. ed. (Nashville: B & H Pub. Group, 1992) Wordsearch ed.

Holy Spirit. Moments like these can be opportunities to point to Jesus when we follow the principle Paul used.

QUESTION 3:

How can we follow Paul's example of embracing opportunities to share the gospel?

Acts 17:22-23

22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

KEY WORDS: **Mars' hill** (v. 22)—The name of a hill on which a formal court met where philosophers judged ideas.

Too superstitious (v. 22)—The Athenians probably heard this as a commendation of their piety, but Paul likely also meant that their religion was built on superstition.

As Paul engaged the Athenians, he looked for an open door to draw them into conversation. He acknowledged they were “religious,” knowing full well their “religion” had nothing to do with the One true God. Yet, that point of commonality was a springboard for him to talk about what they didn’t know—and what they didn’t know was Jesus. They didn’t even believe in one God, but the apostle was actively looking for some way to connect with the people around him. Notice some of the verbs in verses 22-23: “I perceive ... I beheld ... , I found.” And he found the connection: they worshiped—and so did Paul. He found common ground in their spirituality. Granted, they were worshiping the wrong things, but at least they were spiritual seekers. So Paul used this to connect.

By building an altar and inscribing it “To THE UNKNOWN GOD,” the Athenians were attempting to make sure they didn’t unintentionally forget and thereby risk offending, one of the gods. Paul used their acknowledgement that there could be a god they didn’t know as an opening to introduce them to “God that made the world and all things therein” (v. 24). Using something they knew about—their own altar to the unknown god—Paul told them they didn’t know about the “Lord of heaven and earth” and His plan to save them.

Opportunities to share the gospel can come at unexpected moments. My husband and son were walking on a beach in sunny Southern California when they came across two skateboarders. Their attention was first drawn to the tricks the skaters were doing on the cement ramps, but then my husband noticed their T-shirts and tattoos. They proudly wore upside-down pentagrams, the symbol of the church of Satan. My husband engaged the skaters in a conversation, which gradually turned to spiritual beliefs. The skaters were surprised by my husband's inquiry regarding their involvement with the satanic church since they were usually met with hostility or fear. He made the point that though their faith and beliefs were different from his, it was a common topic he would be open to discuss. As the door of conversation widened, my husband shared this passage where Paul made a point of connection with the idol worshipers in Athens. The skaters were intrigued by the story of the unknown God and their interest led to an opportunity for my husband to share the gospel.

Though we may think people aren't open to hear the gospel, they often are willing to discuss spiritual matters when we start with a point of commonality which places both parties on equal ground. I am not saying that our different beliefs are equal, but as followers of Christ, we seek those places of connection as an opening to share God's important message of truth.

Share Jesus Without Fear:**5 Questions to Ask**

1. Do you have any kind of spiritual beliefs?
2. To you, who is Jesus?
3. Do you think there is a heaven or hell?
4. If you died, where would you go, heaven or hell? If heaven, why?
5. If what you say you believe is not true, would you want to know?

AFTER HELLO: HOW TO START A GOSPEL CONVERSATION

See the article on pages 148-151 to see how you can learn from the

way Jesus related to people how to initiate a conversation that may lead to an opportunity to share your faith in Jesus with others.

When you begin to look for that connecting point, you'll find it. Love of family, the pain of loss, hobbies and interests—these are things we all share. Begin to look and listen for common ground. Listen to the concerns people talk about, notice the team logo they wear, see the religious symbols they display. Any of these can be conversation starters that lead to discussions about the gospel.

QUESTION 4:

How can finding common ground with others lead to doors being opened to share the gospel?

ENGAGE

Make a list of areas in your life where you currently have common ground with nonbelievers (e.g. work, hobbies, skills, needs).

How can you use this common ground to be a starting point for sharing the gospel?

Acts 17:30-31

30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

It's great to go where people are and get involved in what they're doing. It's great to ask questions and start discussions. But it doesn't end there. To stop there is like walking away from the marathon just short of the finish line. Ultimately, we need to get to the truth of what Jesus did to bring us into a relationship with God.

As Paul spoke to the Athenians at the Areopagus, he framed the message in terms familiar to his listeners. He quoted their poets and spoke their language, but he still got down to the gospel. The Athenians struggled to accept God as Creator and Judge and to believe in Jesus' resurrection, but on these points, Paul did not compromise the truths of the gospel.

Paul did what he could to make the truth clear to the Athenians. When he mentioned the resurrection of Jesus, he was stopped by some in the crowd. Some even ridiculed him, but Paul's witness was not in vain. Others wanted to know more ("some people joined him and believed" [v. 34]).

In our encounters with unbelievers, we need to present the full gospel. Responding to the gospel requires an acknowledgement that sin separates us from God and that a price had to be paid for our sins. This leads us to recognize and understand that Jesus was the only acceptable sacrifice for our sin and that Jesus became our substitute to enable us to be brought back into a relationship with God. Only Jesus can free us from a deadly debt, and that is amazing good news.

Paul met the Athenians on their grounds, brought the truth of Jesus into the conversation, and crossed the finish line in communicating the gospel. The results would be up to God. We can do the same in our own encounters.

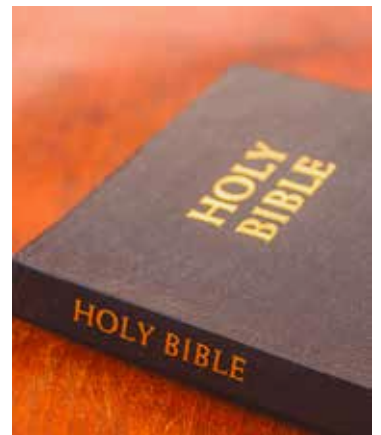
QUESTION 5:

How would you address the topics of judgment and repentance with someone you love?

LIVE IT OUT

What will you do this week to share the gospel with someone?

- ▶ **Open your heart.** Pray and ask God to make you aware of the opportunities around you to talk about your faith. Pray for a willingness to share Christ with others.
- ▶ **Open your eyes.** Make a list of areas of interest you share with other people. With the list, identify ways those areas of interest could be used to turn the conversation to the gospel.
- ▶ **Open your mouth.** Be diligent about maximizing your windows of opportunity to share Christ. Be intentional in making natural bridges between you and another person to talk about the gospel.





AFTER HELLO: HOW TO START A GOSPEL CONVERSATION

By Bob Hostetler

My friend Jim has always amazed me. I've watched and listened as he meets someone and within a few moments is discussing spiritual things and leading that person closer to God—often even ushering that person into God's kingdom.

Jim definitely has the spiritual gift of evangelism. But I've learned, not only from him but also from others, a few ways to start gospel conversations that have never failed me. In fact, the Gospel accounts of Jesus' conversations offer pointers any of us can emulate to lead a person closer to (and even into) a relationship with Jesus Christ.

START BY LISTENING

Nicodemus, a prominent religious and civic leader, came to Jesus at night and tried to flatter Him: “‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him’” (John 3:2).

Jesus listened, not only to the man’s words but also to his heart. He answered, “‘Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God’” (v. 3). The conversation that followed eventually led to everyone’s favorite memory verse: “‘For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life’” (v. 16).

Jesus apparently let Nicodemus start the conversation; He listened and took His cues not only from the man’s words but also from their surroundings, commenting on the night (and perhaps the sunrise), saying, “‘The light has come into the world, and people loved

darkness rather than the light ... [A]nyone who lives by the truth comes to the light’” (v. 19,21). It’s a truly divine example: We must do our best to listen first and listen well whenever we hope to lead the discussion toward spiritual things.

START WITH COMPASSION

The first verses of John 8 tell the story of a woman who was caught in adultery and cruelly presented to Jesus by some of the religious authorities in an effort to trap Him into saying something that would discredit Him. After disarming her persecutors, Jesus waited until everyone left and they were alone together. He said, “‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’” (v. 10). When she—possibly in a tone of amazement—answered, “‘No one, Lord,’” Jesus spoke compassionate, gracious words: “‘Neither do I condemn you ... Go, and from now on do not sin anymore’” (v. 11).

Too often we try to start conversations about spiritual things by providing conviction, even condemnation—which is

never our job anyway. But Jesus offers us a helpful example. Take your time, as Jesus did in His encounter with that woman, and show empathy toward a fellow human being. Compassion and understanding go a long way in opening people's hearts to the presentation of spiritual truth.

START WITH THEIR NEED

On a visit to Jericho, Jesus encountered a man named Bartimaeus. He was blind. He was begging. His need was obvious. But Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51).

Bartimaeus answered, "I want to see'" (v. 51).

Jesus said, simply, "Go, your faith has saved you'" (v. 52). Jesus surely knew the man's need, but He asked, nonetheless.

It's a great way to start a gospel conversation with anyone. "Can I help?" "Is there something I can do for you?" "Is there anything I can pray about for you? With you?" Or, as Steve, another friend of mine, often asks, "Can I pray a 10-second prayer for you?" He says that few people refuse that non-threatening, low-commitment request.

START WITH YOUR NEED

When Jesus took a midday breather by a well outside a Samaritan town, He met a woman from the nearby town, whose lifestyle left much to be desired. So He started a conversation about spiritual things. But He didn't launch the encounter talking about her need; He started with His need. He asked her for a drink of water. And things proceeded from there until she became an evangelist herself. (See John 4:1-42.)

It may seem counterintuitive, but a little honesty and vulnerability about our own needs can open doors to spiritual conversations. "I don't know about you, but I'm struggling with sadness



today,” or “Do you pray? I could use some prayer right now” can lower barriers and lead to openness about spiritual things. We don’t have to act like we always have the answers; our own questions and concerns can point the way to the One who is the answer.

Like many things, when we turn our eyes on Jesus and His example, it all seems simple and obvious, doesn’t it? So it can be, if we just relax, follow His lead, and start the conversation.

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