



Chapter 7

Learning to Articulate the Faith

Acts 17

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Acts 17

The Big Picture

St. Paul learned to speak to different crowds in different ways. We should follow his example and pay close attention to the kinds of people we are speaking to.

In Acts 17, St. Paul faces three very different situations where he uses three different styles of evangelistic conversations. The goal of this chapter is to explore how St. Paul talks to people about the faith and how we can use these strategies in our relationships with people today.

St. Paul and the Thessalonians (Acts 17:1-9)

Thessalonica was a major Roman city in northern Greece and was one of many stops that St. Paul made on his missionary journeys. We have two letters in the New Testament that St. Paul sent to this Church: 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

St. Paul's teaching causes jealousy among some of the Jews, and a small riot ensues. This isn't the first riot caused by St. Paul (Acts 16:19-24) and it won't be the last (Acts 19:21-41).

Is Jesus Lord or Is Caesar Lord?

The Jews make two accusations: first, that St. Paul and his companions are disturbing their city like they have disturbed others. Second, they are "acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7).

The question of kingship is a major theme in St. Paul's writings and in the early Church. It was of utmost importance that the citizens of the Roman Empire proclaimed Caesar as Lord. "Caesar is Lord" was a popular phrase by which people would greet one another in the street. When the Roman Empire conquered a new land, it would demand that all of the people confess that "Caesar is Lord." If not, the people were often tortured, crucified, and killed to show what happened to people who didn't recognize the lordship of Caesar. In light of this background, claiming that Jesus was king and Lord was a capital offense. This flew in the face of the cult that surrounded the caesars and the force with which they punished those who refused to claim their lordship.

The Bereans (Acts 17:10-15)

The Jews in Berea are one of the few groups in Acts that considers Paul's message calmly and rationally. Like the Ethiopian eunuch, they are very open to hearing the apostles' interpretation of the Scriptures. The only downfall is that Berea is close to Thessalonica, and the Jews there come over to Berea to chase St. Paul away.

St. Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-21)

This may be St. Paul's most famous speech in Acts. Athens was a city of Greek philosophy and intellect; the Areopagus was a famous Athenian landmark known as Mars Hill. It was a low hill in the city where intellectuals gathered to discuss education, philosophy, and religion.

The story begins with St. Paul touring the city and seeing it filled with idols. As he shares the gospel with Jews and others in the town, he is approached by Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. The Stoics had a high regard for nature and believed in pantheism—god in nature. In general, they believed that, if there were a god, he was not involved in their lives. The Epicureans' goal was to avoid pain and discomfort and to pursue the sensual. Others in this group accuse St. Paul of being a babbler—someone who understood ideas but who lacked wisdom and sophistication (Acts 17:18). In response, they take him to the Aeropagus in front of the intellectuals of the city to hear his exact message.

Application to Jesus

Jesus speaks to each human heart where they are. How do we cooperate with God's will in conforming our message and speech to others?

St. Paul's Strategies with a Greek Audience

This speech is also famous because it displays the brilliance of St. Paul's preaching to other cultures. Some of the tactics Paul uses in his address include:

Very religious

St. Paul notes and encourages their search for religion (Acts 17:22). By pointing out their "unknown god," St. Paul is showing how his God can fit into their current religious system.

Not afraid to point out their differences

While encouraging their religiosity, St. Paul does not shy away from noting their differences. His God is not one made by hands. Contrary to the Stoics' belief, his something in creation, He is the one who created everything and everyone.

Using the logic of the culture

St. Paul is not afraid to use the logic of the culture to prove his point. In verse 28, he is most likely referring to the Greek poet Epimenides; while later in the verse, he quotes the Greek writer Aratus. He uses the language of the culture while pointing to something greater.

Urgency

St. Paul was talking to a group who, according to St. Luke, “spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). In this environment, St. Paul knows that the listeners need some urgency in responding to his message. He points out that everyone needs to repent because God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

Throughout this chapter, there are many lessons on how we can speak to others about the gospel.

Application to Our Lives

We can't speak to everyone the same. How do we learn how to speak to non-Christians or fallen-away Christians about what we believe?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Acts 17

STEP 1: OPENER

When is the last time you had a discussion about the faith with someone who disagreed with you? How did it go?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In Acts 17, St. Paul faces three very different situations where he uses three different styles of evangelistic conversations. In this chapter, we are going to look at what strategies he uses and how they can help us in our own evangelization.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Today's passage is Acts 17. Start by reading Acts 17:1-9.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. St. Luke reports that it was St. Paul's custom to explain and prove Jesus Christ from the Scriptures. St. Paul is very intentional in using reason when he talks to others. What role does reason play in our conversations with others about Jesus?

Answer: We can use reason to speak to the truth that others see in their own lives and in the world.

2. What is the reaction of the people in Thessalonica?

Answer: They riot.

3. What are the apostles accused of?

Answer: Two things: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:7). "They are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7).

4. What would it take for you to be accused of turning your campus upside down?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. Why would it be against the decrees of Caesar to claim Jesus as Lord?

Answer: See "Is Jesus Lord or Is Caesar Lord?"

6. What is the reaction today when we claim Jesus as Lord or stand by one of the Church's controversial teachings?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include accusations that Christianity makes us bigots or impairs our reason.

7. When people become hostile and emotional when talking about the faith, what is the best way to talk to them and act towards them?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read Acts 17:10-15

8. How are the Berean Jews different than the Jews in Thessalonica?

Answer: They are willing to reason from Scripture rather than being jealous and emotional.

9. What are some ways we can foster rational discussion about our faith rather than emotional arguments?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include articulating your respect for the other's group, seeking to understand before being understood, and focusing on one issue at a time.

Read Acts 17:16-34

10. In verse 18, St. Paul is disturbed to see that the city is full of idols. What are the idols in our culture today? What idols disturb you the most?

Allow the group to discuss.

11. What are some of the strategies that St. Paul uses in his speech at the Aeropagus?

Answer: See the section "St. Paul's Strategies with a Greek Audience."

12. St. Paul does a great job of building a bridge to their pre-established beliefs to show them that they are already seeking the God that he is speaking about. What are people seeking today?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include: happiness, love, significance.

13. St. Paul appeals to the religion of those in the Aeropagus. Do you think people are religious today? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include: Everyone worships something. While more and more people in America do not consider themselves "religious," they are turning to new-age philosophies and spiritualities to fill the void. Humans are religious by our very nature. We were made for God, and we will fill this hole with something else if God is not there.

14. G. K. Chesterton once said, "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God." How can we proclaim God in such a way that relates to what people are seeking?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include: Help break down stereotypes about Christianity. For instance, Christianity isn't just about rules; it is about helping us come fully alive as human beings. God wants us to be happy even more than we do.

