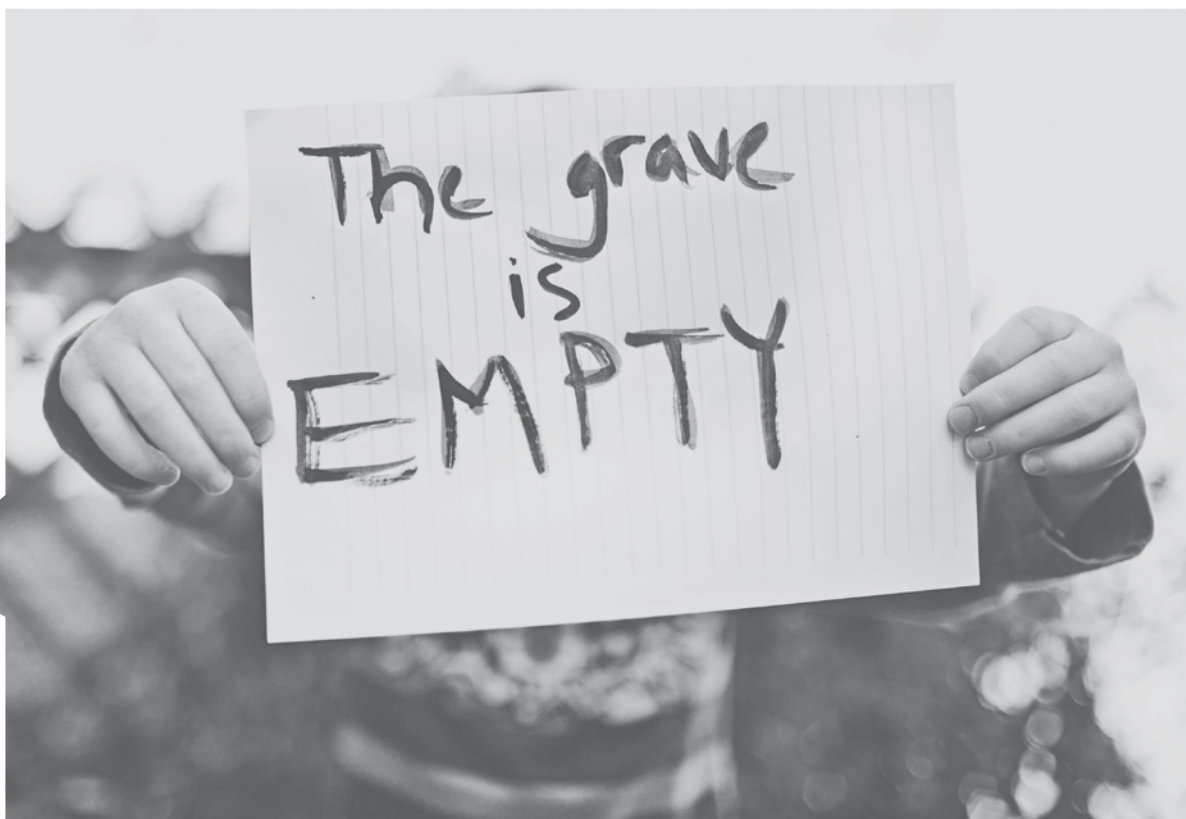


UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL



Nothing stops our God. Nothing stops His gospel.

Don't write off the church.

Some people already have. They say they like Jesus, but there's no point to the church. As far as they're concerned, the church is a failed institution.

I disagree.

The church is far from a lost cause! In reality, the church is unstoppable because the followers of Christ have been given an unstoppable power—the very Spirit of God. Even more, they've been given an unstoppable mission and message.

Come with me on a journey through the exciting early days of the church. We'll discover what made the early church so powerful—so *unstoppable*. As the Book of Acts opens, we'll see a room full of huddled, scared disciples who were completely powerless and uncertain of the future. But we'll also see these same followers become empowered and effective men and women advancing throughout the world, proclaiming the unstoppable gospel that turned the world upside down.

The story of the unstoppable gospel continues today. It is our story as members of the church.

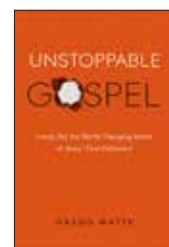
In Christ, we are unstoppable.



Gregg Matte

Gregg Matte is the senior pastor of Houston's First Baptist Church, a multi-site church with five campuses. Before coming to Houston's First in 2004, Gregg founded Breakaway Ministries at Texas A&M University, a weekly gathering that grew to more than 4,000 students.

Gregg is the author of *Unstoppable Gospel* (Baker Books, 2015), the book that is the basis for this study.



Unstoppable Gospel

Session 1 ***Unstoppable Mission*** Acts 1:4-8,12-14

Session 2 ***Unstoppable Message*** Acts 2:22-24,32-33,36-38

Session 3 ***Unstoppable Love*** Acts 2:41-47

Session 4 ***Unstoppable Opportunities*** Acts 3:1-10

Session 5 ***Unstoppable Courage*** Acts 4:1-3,8-12,19-20

Session 6 ***Unstoppable Impact*** Acts 17:16-18,22-23,30-31

1

UNSTOPPABLE MISSION



When has something definitely been worth the wait?

QUESTION #1

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THE POINT

The Holy Spirit empowers us to spread the gospel.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

We don't like to wait. Chalk it up to impatience, or maybe it's because we live in a world of instant gratification. But we want what we want when we want it.

- ▶ Two minutes waiting behind another customer at the fast food drive-thru? Too long.
- ▶ Sixty seconds to heat up food in a microwave? Too long.
- ▶ Fifteen seconds waiting for a movie to stream to your TV? Way too long!

At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus told His disciples to wait. He was going to give them—and us—an incredible gift: the presence and power of His Holy Spirit. The disciples couldn't have fully appreciated what all that meant, but they waited nonetheless.

When the Holy Spirit came, He empowered Jesus' followers for a mission that was unstoppable. From that single location, their mission spread across the world—and continues today.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 1:4-5

⁴ While He was together with them, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father's promise. "This," He said, "is what you heard from Me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

The life of a Christian is not hard; it's impossible. Following Jesus means:

- ▶ Loving people—even the people who hate you.
- ▶ Doing the ethical thing at work even it means putting your career on the line.
- ▶ Forgiving people who don't deserve to be forgiven.

The One who called us to this impossible life never sugarcoated how difficult it would be. In fact, Jesus said: "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). He also made this troubling promise: "You will have suffering in this world" (John 16:33).

Jesus, the Son of God, never expected us to live this impossible life in our own power. Indeed, Jesus Himself lived His life on earth in union with and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit is the secret to the power we need to live and follow Jesus today. In other words, living the Christian life is only possible with the power of the Holy Spirit living through us.

In Acts 1:4-5, Jesus reminded His followers they soon would receive the gift He had promised earlier: the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit would descend on believers to empower them to preach the gospel. From that moment forward, God's people would be forever changed in how they related with Him.

What do you find difficult about waiting on the Lord?

QUESTION #2

Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do nothing of importance in our lives. But once we receive His power at salvation, we can do *anything* He calls us to do.

A little boy once heard that if he asked Jesus to be his Savior, God would come live inside his heart. So he asked his parents, “How can God live inside my heart? He’s so big! He made the whole world! If He lived inside my heart, He’d stick out!”

That little boy was right. If God truly lives in our hearts, He’s going to stick out. His love will stick out. His forgiveness will stick out. His power will stick out.

And the world will know.

Acts 1:6-8

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked Him, “Lord, are You restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

God sent the Holy Spirit to work through us to continue the work of bringing His children home. In verse 8, Jesus laid out God’s agenda succinctly. His mandate in this verse laid the foundation for the rest of the Book of Acts, which is largely about how the early believers carried out this mandate.

Jesus told His followers to remain in Jerusalem and wait, because they would soon receive the power the Father had promised (see v. 4). When they were filled with the Spirit, they would be His “witnesses” telling what they had experienced with Jesus. They would do this with His power, not their own—the power of His Spirit.

What do these verses teach us about God’s mission?

QUESTION #3

BE MY WITNESSES

Use the space below to make a prayer list based on Acts 1:8. Fill out the different categories with specific requests you can echo throughout the coming week.

Lord, I'm praying this week that You do the following in my city:

Lord, I'm praying this week that You do the following in my nation:

Lord, I'm praying this week that You do the following in my world:

Lord, I'm praying this week that You do the following in my heart:

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep
to gain that which he cannot lose!"

—JIM ELLIOT

The Greek word for “power” is *dunamis*, from which we get our English words “dynamo,” “dynamite,” and “dynamic.” The Spirit empowers His church to do amazing things. By the power of the Holy Spirit, a tiny handful of believers turned the world upside down as the “gospel earthquake” rumbled from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

“Jerusalem ... Judea and Samaria, and ... the ends of the earth.” Jesus laid out a deliberate plan of expansion that began at home and moved outward geographically to include all people. The same Spirit who descended on believers at Pentecost and turned the world upside down for Jesus is alive today in every person who has placed faith in Christ. He is sending you and me out on a mission.

- ▶ We can obey Acts 1:8 by hopping on a plane and flying to the ends of the earth.
- ▶ We can carry out Acts 1:8 by sending the good news out to the ends of the earth over the Internet.
- ▶ We can fulfill Acts 1:8 right at home, because the world is literally coming to our cities. Whenever you go to work, school, the store, or anywhere else in your town, you are likely to hear unfamiliar languages being spoken. We can carry the Lord’s message to the ends of the earth in our own neighborhoods even as we also go to the ends of the earth.

We are empowered to be on mission to our city, nation and world.



Acts 1:12-14

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—a Sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³ When they arrived, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James.

¹⁴ All these were continually united in prayer, along with the women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.

What do you do when you find yourself waiting on the next thing God has for you? Many of us just try to stay busy. We fill the waiting with activity. Not these disciples. They went to a single upstairs room and *prayed*. In fact, they “were continually united in prayer” for ten days.

Let me share what I see in the disciples’ ten-day prayer meeting:

- ▶ **Prayer is primary.** For many of us, prayer is often a last resort. “When all else fails, pray.” But prayer was not the last resort for the early church. It was the main agenda.
- ▶ **Fear can be a great motivator.** For all the disciples knew, the same people who crucified their Lord might come for them, as well. It was fear, not piety, that drove the early church to its knees. In times of anxiety and fear, remember this: *If you go to your knees in fear, you’ll rise up in faith.*
- ▶ **Prayer unites us.** The disciples “were continually united in prayer.” They were single-minded, joined together as one. Why? Because prayer unites us.

Prayer maximizes “Thee” and minimizes “me.” Prayer says, “My agenda is unimportant, Lord, but Your agenda is all-important.” The reason for so much disunity and disharmony in the church is because many Christians contend for their own agendas, not God’s agenda. When we pray and seek God’s will together, He will unify us and keep us focused on our common center: Jesus the Lord.

What are some of the benefits of praying together as a group?

QUESTION #4

What common mission can our group pray for together?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

Acts 1:8 is our mandate. It's mine, and it's yours. Therefore, consider taking one or more of the following steps toward fulfilling that mandate in the days to come:

- ▶ **Accept the mission.** Recognize that Jesus has commanded you to be His witness wherever you go and wherever He sends you. Verbally commit yourself to His service.
- ▶ **Embrace the gift.** Begin each day by submitting to the Holy Spirit as your only source of strength and guidance. Pray that He would give you wisdom and power to accomplish God's mission in your life.
- ▶ **Pray together.** Gather an extra time as a group this week. Make prayer the sole focus and action of that gathering.

God's mission is unstoppable—and so is the Spirit He's placed within you. Remember that you have a part to play in that mission. Remember also that it all begins with prayer.

My thoughts



Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLunstoppable**

2

UNSTOPPABLE MESSAGE



What often gets you sidetracked during the day?

QUESTION #1

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BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **75**

THE POINT

*Jesus died for our sins, rose again,
and reigns as Lord.*



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Do you know the original mission statement of Harvard University?

“Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life (John 17:3) and ... seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let every one seriously set himself by prayer in secret to seek it of him (Prov. 2:3).”

Surprised? When the school was founded in 1636, the administration hired only Christian professors, the formation of Christian character was a top priority for students, and ministers were trained and equipped to share the gospel.

Today, Harvard maintains a legacy of academic excellence, but has lost its original mission—a phenomenon often described as “mission drift.” The university lost sight of its original purpose.¹

Unfortunately, mission drift happens in the church, as well. As we’ll see in Acts 2, there is a clear, unstoppable message that drives our mission. It’s up to us to stay the course.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 2:22-24

²²“Men of Israel, listen to these words: This Jesus the Nazarene was a man pointed out to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did among you through Him, just as you yourselves know. ²³ Though He was delivered up according to God’s determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail Him to a cross and kill Him. ²⁴ God raised Him up, ending the pains of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it.”

Peter spoke of “God’s determined plan,” yet “lawless people” killed Jesus. In other words, God was in control, but the men involved were held responsible for their deeds. Peter stated these two truths together, unflinchingly and without apology.

As for human responsibility, we can never grasp the meaning of the cross until we understand the depth of our sin and how it separates us from God. Along with the lawless men who crucified Jesus, *we all are responsible for Jesus’ death*. Once we see ourselves as sinners in need of salvation, we can understand why there had to be a cross—why the cross is vital to our message.

But Jesus didn’t merely die; He rose again. If Jesus had sacrificed His life for us and then remained dead, His would be a poignant story about a martyr. But Jesus is unique in all of history. He is the only person who ever lived, died, and returned to life—never to die again.

Jesus’ death and resurrection are the heartbeat of the gospel message.

What can we learn from Peter’s approach to sharing the gospel?

QUESTION #2

Acts 2:32-33,36

³²“God has resurrected this Jesus. We are all witnesses of this. ³³ Therefore, since He has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, He has poured out what you both see and hear.” ... ³⁶“Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah!”

In A.D. 186, Polycarp, a church leader in Smyrna, stood before the Roman authorities and faced a decision. He could proclaim Caesar as lord and live, or he could refuse and die a martyr. For Polycarp, there was no other lord but Jesus. The proconsul weighed Polycarp’s fate and urged him, “Swear, and I will release thee—reproach Christ.”

But Polycarp held fast: “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?” With that confession, Polycarp was burned alive and pierced with a sword. He died for professing his belief that Jesus alone is Lord.²

When the Romans called Caesar *kurios*, or “Lord,” they were using that term in its highest sense: to signify divinity. They were acknowledging the emperor as their god, since the title denoted absolute sovereignty.

Peter used the same term at the climax of his sermon in Acts 2:36 to describe the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah!” In this sense, *Lord* is a majestic title, used to show God’s sovereignty and divine power. The word points to the Deity of Jesus; Peter was declaring Jesus is God.

What are the personal implications of recognizing Jesus as Lord?

QUESTION #3

Jesus “has been exalted to the right hand of God.” With the Father, He sits in the most authoritative, sovereign position in the universe. It’s because Jesus holds this most exalted position that He had the authority to pour out the Holy Spirit along with the signs and wonders people witnessed that day.

Because Jesus is Lord and Messiah:

- ▶ **He is worthy of our worship.** He’s not only worthy of our respect, but also of our worship. He is the One before whom every knee one day will bow (see Phil. 2:10-11).
- ▶ **He is worthy of our obedience.** Because Jesus is Lord and Messiah, He deserves to be sovereign in our lives. He has the absolute right to tell us what to do and expect our complete obedience.

What are the worldwide implications of Jesus’ role as Lord?

QUESTION #4



Acts 2:37-38

³⁷ When they heard this, they came under deep conviction and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: “Brothers, what must we do?” ³⁸ “Repent,” Peter said to them, “and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Peter’s sermon had a devastating impact on his hearers. In the original Greek, Luke’s words mean they were “cut to the heart.” These people were suffering and sorrowing over the sin of having rejected and crucified the Messiah. They were filled with anguish and horror over what they had done.

The goal of biblical preaching is not to make people feel guilty or condemned, but to open their hearts to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Here’s why:

- ▶ **Condemnation** brings a general feeling of worthlessness, like a wet blanket. Condemnation leaves you feeling powerless and immobilized, totally discouraged from changing.
- ▶ **Conviction** brings awareness of specific sins, attitudes, and habits in your life that need to be changed. It’s a specific spotlight on areas in need of care. When the Holy Spirit convicts you, He does so with the loving desire that you turn from sin and turn to Christ.

When the people asked, “What must we do?” Peter was poised and ready with a call to action: “Repent . . . and be baptized.” The word “repent” in the Greek language means to change the way you think about your life and your behavior. It means agreeing that God is right and you are wrong. In essence, Peter told his listeners to repent and reverse the course of their lives.

Notice that baptism is a part of repentance. Peter was calling the crowd to be baptized *because* their sins had been forgiven. That’s the unstoppable message: Jesus is Lord and Christ, and when we acknowledge Him and turn from our sin, we are forgiven.

As we share the gospel, how can we work toward the goal of conviction rather than condemnation?

QUESTION #5

JESUS IS LORD

Use the space below to record words, phrases, or images that come to mind when you think of the word "Lord."

What are some practical steps you take to approach Jesus as Lord in your own life?

"If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost!"

—CORRIE TEN BOOM

LIVE IT OUT

How will the unstoppable message of the gospel influence your life this week? Consider the following options:

- ▶ **Praise Him.** Jesus is worthy of our worship; therefore, set aside a time this week to praise Him in a way that is meaningful to you.
- ▶ **Share.** The message of salvation is for all Christians to share. Pray for opportunities to share the message of Jesus in your everyday conversations. Plan to tell someone this week about the difference Jesus has made in your life.
- ▶ **Invite others.** As you worship Jesus and share the truth of the gospel this week, invite others to join you. Find someone who needs a spiritually mature example and encourage him or her to join with you in following Jesus.

Let's avoid the dangers of "mission drift," both in our lives and in our churches. Let's not forget that the message of Jesus Christ and His salvation is the reason for everything we do.

My thoughts



1. Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift* (Bethany House, 2014), 17.
2. <http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/fox102.htm>.

Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLunstoppable**

3

UNSTOPPABLE LOVE



What are some employee benefits that would get you excited?

QUESTION #1

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THE POINT

Loving people is a powerful expression of loving God.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Many businesses are famous not just for their products and services, but also for their work environments. For example:

- ▶ An Internet-related company offers its employees on-site vehicle maintenance, a laundromat, hair salon, and nap pods during work hours.
- ▶ A toy company offers paid time off for school-related absences like parent-teacher conferences or field trips.
- ▶ Other companies offer physical perks such as on-site gyms, pools, and even bowling alleys.¹

These companies have created an inviting culture that draws people to work and keeps them happy.

The church is known for a culture that is far deeper than corporate perks. The early church's culture overflowed with love—love that reflected Jesus Christ and drew people to Him. Their example in Acts 2 challenges us to continue that reputation and be a church immersed in a culture of love.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 2:41-42

⁴¹ So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.

God did an incredible work in and through His people on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon the believers, Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus, and 3,000 people responded and were added to their number. Out of their common love for Christ, the believers came together and shared meals, worshiped and praised God together, and otherwise enjoyed one another's company. They continued to grow by learning under the apostles' teaching, fellowshiping together, and praying.

Let's focus for a moment on that crucial last element: *praying*.

Every great movement from God starts with prayer and is confirmed by prayer. As we saw in Acts 1, the first activity of the church was a prayer meeting.

Prayer is the key to effective evangelism. We don't change people's hearts with our convincing arguments or clever presentations. Far more important than anything a believer can learn about evangelism is how much he or she depends on the Holy Spirit for witnessing. Before you start to have a conversation about Christ with your neighbor, coworker, or a fellow student—pause for prayer. It doesn't need to be a long, involved prayer. Sometimes it's enough to say, "Lord, let me speak Your words."

A friend of mine says, "The reason we don't pray is not because we're too busy, but because we're too confident." Jesus said, "You can do nothing without Me" (John 15:5); Paul wrote, "Pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17). Prayer should drive us to our knees in humility, knowing we need Jesus every hour.

What aspects of church life have been especially meaningful to you?

QUESTION #2

Prayer allows God to change *me*—the one praying. As I pray in the love of Christ for others who don't know God, I become more burdened for their souls. As I pray for their broken relationships, health concerns, financial worries, or problems at work, I grow in concern and love for them. People will be more open to hearing our message when they sense that we genuinely care about them and what matters to them.

Praying for others leads to caring for others.

Acts 2:43-45

⁴³ Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all the believers were together and held all things in common.

⁴⁵ They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need.

The believers in the early church didn't just meet together to pray and worship. Verses 43-45 shows how they provided for one another's needs. Three characteristics are prominent:

- ▶ **Unity.** They "were together and held all things in common."
- ▶ **Selflessness.** "They sold their possessions and property."
- ▶ **Mutual care.** They "distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need."

Caring for people is an incredible way to open a conversation about Jesus Christ. It's been said that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

The first Christians were so committed to caring for others they sold their own possessions and property to provide for anyone among them who was in need. That's pretty radical.

When have you seen the transformational power of prayer?

QUESTION #3

In the second century, a writer and philosopher named Aristides the Athenian described the early believers this way:

“They love one another, and from the widows they do not turn away their countenance; and they rescue the orphan from him who does him violence; and he who has gives to him who has not, without grudging. . . . And if there is among them a man that is poor or needy, and they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.”²

Anything the early Christians contributed was a gift that came directly from the heart, not from autocratic rule. They gave from the overflow of their generosity.

Just as the early believers weren’t required to sell all their possessions, neither are we. In this passage, Luke was describing what happened in the early church, not giving us a mandate. Nevertheless, their example of caring and extravagant love should motivate us to consider how we can imitate it.

How much should we give and how much should we keep? No one can give a pat, once-and-for-always answer to that question. We must find the balance in our own lives. The point is not to adopt an attitude of “How much do I *have* to give?” Rather, the point is to respond to the God who loves us extravagantly with a heart of loving generosity.



How would you describe a healthy balance between giving and keeping in today’s world?

QUESTION #4

Acts 2:46-47

⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.

The early church certainly prayed and cared for others. But they didn't stop there. Perhaps if the believers had done only these two things and nothing more, none of us would know about Jesus today. At some point, in addition to praying for and helping people, they had to tell them about Jesus—who He is and why He lived, died, and rose again. They had to give voice to the message behind their loving acts.

In other words, the early believers evangelized! We know this is true because “every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.” This happened because someone who knew Jesus told someone who didn't know Jesus how to know Jesus.

In most situations today, the opportunity to share Christ is built on the foundation of friendship. You'll pray for a person and find some way to demonstrate you sincerely care—even if it's just to say, “I've been praying for you about that problem you shared with me.” In the course of praying and caring, the Lord will give you an opportunity to share how Jesus is the answer to whatever he or she is going through.

Take a moment to think about these three simple acts: pray, care, and share. When we pray, God helps us to care for others. When we care, He leads us to share about His Son, Jesus. And the more we share the gospel, the more we are reminded to pray for those who need it.

Three simple acts become an incredible, dynamic lifestyle of loving God and serving others.

***Loving others involves praying, caring, and sharing.
In which of these areas would you like to grow?***

QUESTION #5

PRAY, CARE, SHARE

Think of someone in your sphere of influence who would benefit from experiencing the love of Christ. Use the questions below to plan out how to pray for that person, care for him or her in a practical way, and share the message of the gospel.

When will you pray for this person each day?

What's one practical step you can take in the coming week to show this person you care?

What will you communicate to this person when an opportunity appears to share the good news of the gospel?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you actively and intentionally show love to people this week? Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ **Pray.** Take a prayer walk through your neighborhood. Pray for the spiritual, emotional, and financial needs of each household—and pray especially for their salvation.
- ▶ **Care.** Actively look for someone in need this week. Determine to give sacrificially, whether of your time, money, or other resources to help that person in the name of Jesus.
- ▶ **Share.** Think of someone you've prayed for or helped in practical ways but never talked to about Jesus. Bring Jesus into your conversation with that person. Let them know your concern for them is motivated by the love of Christ in your life.

As members of the church, we have an opportunity to create a culture that's way more attractive than anything a corporation could produce. But it starts with you. Choose to pray, care, and share as a witness of Christ.

My thoughts



1. <http://www.businessinsider.com/company-perks-that-will-make-you-jealous-2014-7?op=1>
2. *The Apology of Aristides: on Behalf of the Christians*, edited by J. Rendel Harris (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 49.

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4

UNSTOPPABLE OPPORTUNITIES



When has a "chance" encounter changed your life?

QUESTION #1

#BSFLunstopable

THE POINT

We intersect daily with people who need Christ.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In the early 70s, Bill Fernandez had two friends named Steve. Out walking around the neighborhood one afternoon with one of them, Bill saw the other Steve washing his car. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to introduce his two friends.

And that's how Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak met. The two hit it off immediately, both having an avid interest in technology. Years later, the two Steves co-founded a little company called Apple®. A chance meeting led to the founding of one of the world's most highly valued businesses.¹

Wait a minute. A *chance* meeting? As a follower of Christ, I hesitate to call the encounters I have with people mere “chance” meetings. These unplanned intersections can be “divine appointments”—opportunities that can change the direction of a life.

In Acts 3, Peter and John took advantage of just such an unplanned meeting to do something incredible for God.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 3:1-4

¹ Now Peter and John were going up together to the temple complex at the hour of prayer at three in the afternoon. ² And a man who was lame from birth was carried there and placed every day at the temple gate called Beautiful, so he could beg from those entering the temple complex. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter the temple complex, he asked for help. ⁴ Peter, along with John, looked at him intently and said, “Look at us.”

Peter and John chose a busy intersection in Jerusalem to share the gospel. Three o’clock in the afternoon was one of the times designated daily for prayer; it was also the time for one of the two daily sacrifices. Therefore, it was a busy time at the temple with large crowds coming to pray and offer sacrifices.

Before they started, Peter and John saw a disabled man begging from those who passed. This was similar to scenes we might see in urban America. I say we *might* see, because so many of us choose not to see. We walk on, avoiding eye contact.

Notice two truths from Peter and John’s interaction with this lame beggar:

- ▶ **Individuals matter.** Peter and John had just seen 3,000 people come to Christ in one day, but they still saw and cared about an individual. They did just what Jesus did—they looked at the lame man as if, at that moment, no one else in the world mattered.
- ▶ **Intersections bring opportunity.** Just as we often drove through crossroads without really seeing what’s there, we can also fail to notice the people we intersect with each day. God put us on this pathway called life, and we need to be aware of those who come and go in our lives.

How can we get better at noticing the opportunities God gives us to love others?

QUESTION #2

Up to this point, the beggar at the temple may have felt like no one ever noticed him. But no more. Peter said to him, “Look at us.” Peter was acknowledging the man’s presence and worth: “We see you. You are not invisible to us. We want to help.”

Thanks to the willingness of Peter and John to turn a divine interruption into an unstoppable opportunity, this man’s life was about to change. Forever.

Acts 3:5-8

⁵ So he turned to them, expecting to get something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, “I don’t have silver or gold, but what I have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!” ⁷ Then, taking him by the right hand he raised him up, and at once his feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ So he jumped up, stood, and started to walk, and he entered the temple complex with them—walking, leaping, and praising God.

There is an old Quaker proverb that states: “I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do, nor any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

Those words reflect Peter and John’s attitude toward the beggar. They didn’t rationalize the way many people do when accosted by panhandlers: *I don’t have any money. Someone else will help. He’ll always be here begging. His relatives should provide for him. He should get a job.* Instead, Peter and John saw someone in need and viewed his need as an opportunity God had placed in their path.

“Peter said, ‘I don’t have silver or gold, but what I have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!’” He took the disabled man by the right hand and pulled him to his feet. The man, who had been “lame from birth” (v. 2), may have expected to topple to the ground immediately; yet his feet and ankles supported him perfectly.

When have you seen Jesus make a dramatic difference in someone’s life?

QUESTION #3

COMMUNITY INTERSECTIONS

Use the space below to make a sketch or map of your community. Place an X on the main locations where different types of people gather on a regular basis.

How can your group use one or more of the locations above to create intersections with other people in your community?

"God needs no one,
but when faith is present
He works through anyone."

—A.W. TOZER

Think of the wild emotional ride the man surely must have experienced: disappointment when Peter told him he would receive no money; terror at being yanked to his feet; and finally, overwhelming joy when he was suddenly whole.

Think about these truths whenever you have a chance to give:

- ▶ **Peter and John gave what they had.** God always supplies what we need to do His work; otherwise, He wouldn't have brought us to that intersection. Even when we feel ill-equipped, we can take a step of faith.
- ▶ **Peter and John relied on Jesus.** The apostles didn't have the power to heal; Jesus did. When they said, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk," they were acknowledging the power and authority of Jesus to heal.

When we begin to open our eyes to the needs around us, it can be overwhelming. People in physical, emotional, and spiritual need are everywhere. Where do we begin—and how do we help with problems so deep-seated?

We must rely on the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us.



Acts 3:9-10

⁹ All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and they recognized that he was the one who used to sit and beg at the Beautiful Gate of the temple complex. So they were filled with awe and astonishment at what had happened to him.

The crowd responded with awe and astonishment. And why not? The man had been lame since birth. When a man has been unable to stand or walk for “over 40 years” (4:22), he just doesn’t suddenly get better. So when the crowd saw this man standing, walking, and even leaping and praising God, it rightly got their attention!

If you read the rest of Acts 3, you’ll see Peter grabbed this opportunity to talk about Jesus to all those who had come to the temple to worship. One opportunity to talk to one man about Jesus led to another opportunity. As a result, the number of the men alone who believed swelled to about 5,000 (see 4:4). It’s the ripple effect: one opportunity leads to another. One changed life leads to another, and another.

Edward Kimball took an interest in a 17-year-old teenager and determined to reach out to him in the name of Jesus. In the shoe store where the young man worked, Kimball led Dwight L. Moody to faith in Christ. Moody would go on to lead thousands to faith in Christ, impacting a whole generation on two continents. Edward Kimball was an ordinary man, just like Peter and John—and just like us. God will take our little acts of obedience and multiply them a thousand times over.

One “yes” to the God-given opportunity in front of you can lead to ongoing impact. One “yes” can bring further opportunities. Because Peter and John responded to the man in their path, they had the opportunity to preach to a crowd. Multitudes responded, bringing more opportunities for ministry.

What does that mean for you? Say, “Yes.”

How have you been affected personally by others’ obedience to Christ?

QUESTION #4

How can we make room now so we can say yes to future opportunities to serve?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

How will you make the most of the intersections and opportunities that come your way this week? Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ **Look.** Search for such opportunities. Allow your schedule to be interrupted in order to minister by listening, offering encouragement, praying with someone, or meeting a need.
- ▶ **Go for it.** Take the steps of obedience that you've been putting off recently. Take a leap of faith and do what you know God has been calling you to do.
- ▶ **Sign up.** You don't have to wait for opportunities to fall in your lap through the regular intersections of life. Consider talking with a staff person at your church and signing up for ministry opportunities that match your gifts.



To follow Jesus is to serve a sovereign God—a God familiar with every nuance of your life and the lives of others. That doesn't leave much room for random chance. Therefore, be ready to respond when opportunities come your way.

My thoughts

1. <http://www.techrepublic.com/article/apples-first-employee-the-remarkable-odyssey-of-bill-fernandez/>

Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLunstopable**

5

UNSTOPPABLE COURAGE



*What's the most courageous act
you've ever seen?*

QUESTION #1

#BSFLunstoppable

THE POINT

God gives us courage to speak boldly for Christ.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Most of us were taught as kids to “think before you speak.” Sometimes, however, we need to speak even though we know our words will get us in trouble. That takes courage.

Consider Mathew Ayairga. The world reeled from the news in 2015 when 21 men from Egypt were kidnapped and beheaded because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Mathew was one of those kidnapped—but it turns out he was neither Egyptian nor a Christian. He just happened to be working in Libya with the other 20 men.

A transformation happened, though, on that fateful day. Kneeling on the beach with their executioners behind them, each man was commanded to renounce his faith, but each one died proclaiming Jesus Christ. When they came to Mathew and made the same demand, he said, “Their God is my God.”¹

Unstoppable courage. We see it first with Peter and John in Acts 4, and this unstoppable courage has continued on to others like Mathew Ayairga.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 4:1-3

¹ Now as they were speaking to the people, the priests, the commander of the temple police, and the Sadducees confronted them, ² because they were provoked that they were teaching the people and proclaiming the resurrection from the dead, using Jesus as the example. ³ So they seized them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening.

As we saw in Acts 3, the miraculous healing of a lame man opened the door for Peter and John to speak about Jesus. Peter seized that opportunity to preach the gospel.

This was a change for Peter. When Jesus was arrested and put on trial, Peter had fearfully denied Him three times (see Luke 22:54-62). But now Peter was demonstrating the courage that failed him in those hours. Peter the Petrified became Peter the Passionate and Fearless.

In addition, Peter demonstrated unstoppable courage in front of the very same people who had terrified him before. Even as he was preaching about the Jewish leaders who had put their Messiah to death and how God had raised Him from the dead, guess who showed up?

- ▶ **The priests.** These were the ones in charge of operating the temple.
- ▶ **The commander of the temple police.** This man was essentially the chief of police.
- ▶ **The Sadducees.** This socially and politically powerful sect in Jewish society didn't believe in the resurrection from the dead. Luke noted they were upset by all the resurrection talk (see v. 2).

What are the risks we face when we proclaim the gospel?

QUESTION #2

Jesus had said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Peter now stood in that power and declared the gospel message without apology.

The opposition Peter and John faced only showcased their courage. Courage is like a diamond on black velvet. It shines brightest against the darkest of circumstances. Courage always involves confrontation and the strong possibility of suffering. Courage is standing for Christ when you know you’ll pay a price for doing so.

For Peter and John, the price was trouble with the authorities and a night in jail. This came as no surprise. Jesus had told them, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

We can expect confrontation when we speak for Jesus. But we can’t let that silence us.

Acts 4:8-12

⁸ Then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders: ⁹ If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a disabled man—by what means he was healed—¹⁰ let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead—by Him this man is standing here before you healthy. ¹¹ This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it.”

The Jewish religious leaders asked a single question of Peter and John: “By what power or in what name have you done this?” (v. 7) They wanted to know how the lame man had been healed.

Peter had only one answer: Jesus.

Peter quoted Psalm 118:22, about the stone rejected by the builders becoming a cornerstone—but he referred to “the stone rejected by *you builders*” (emphasis added). They had executed their own Messiah. Peter went one step further with the truth: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people, and we must be saved by it.”

PICTURING COURAGE

Which of the images below best represents your understanding of what it means to be courageous? Why?



When have you needed courage in order to speak boldly for Christ?

"I believe it is a grave mistake to present Christianity as something charming and popular with no offense to it."

—DOROTHY SAYERS

Today, about half of all Americans believe there is more than one way to get to heaven. Among the other half—those who believe there is only one way to heaven—not all of them necessarily believe Jesus is that way. But even in the church, a staggeringly high number of Christians believe Jesus is not the only way to salvation.²

To claim as Peter did that “there is salvation in no one else” is a slap in the face of all those sincere people doing good and seeking God in other ways. That’s intolerant!

Or is it? “Tolerance” should mean treating all people with respect, regardless of their beliefs. This definition has been altered, though, to mean accepting as *equally valid* all opinions and beliefs. It’s been twisted into a relativistic moral code that says: “Neither of our beliefs is better or worse, right or wrong. Just different.”

Biblical truth renounces this idea. Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Among all the founders of the world’s major religions, Jesus alone claimed to be God (see 10:30; 14:10-11). Only Jesus asserted that He had come to lay down His life for the sins of the world (see Mark 10:45). His resurrection from death validated His claims (see Matt. 12:38-42).

Peter laid the truth on the line about Jesus. Far from being intolerant, he spoke the truth in love.

In a culture that values tolerance above all, how do we boldly and lovingly communicate the message of verse 12?

QUESTION #3

How would you describe the role of the Holy Spirit in sharing the gospel?

QUESTION #4

Acts 4:19-20

¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it’s right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; ²⁰ for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Some people just can’t admit they’re wrong. The religious leaders had in front of them a once-crippled man standing on two strong legs. They were looking at a miracle, yet their hearts remained hard. They couldn’t explain what Peter and John had accomplished, but they could make threats. By prohibiting Peter and John from speaking about Jesus (see v. 18), they were providing the basis to take further legal action should the apostles continue preaching the gospel.

Peter and John were ready with their courageous response: “We are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Christians today have an unhealthy need for others to like and approve of us. All too often, we are like the sign that reads: “I’m a recovering people pleaser—is that OK?” A healthy Christian outlook says:

- ▶ I don’t serve to be validated. I serve because I am validated.
- ▶ I don’t serve to be approved. I serve because I am approved.
- ▶ I don’t serve because I’m insecure. I serve because I’m secure in Christ.

God’s approval is all that matters. The opinions of others will come and go, but God’s love is unchanging and unconditional. We can stand unwaveringly with Him. Why? Because He stood for us, He died for us, and He lives again. We are His.

The unstoppable gospel calls for unstoppable courage.

Where is God directing your group to demonstrate a greater level of courage?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

How will you demonstrate courage this week as you follow Christ? Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ **Please God.** At the end of each day, evaluate your actions and attitudes by answering this question: “Whom did I live to please today?” Practice becoming a God-pleaser rather than a people-pleaser.
- ▶ **Read up.** Information is a great complement to courage. To better understand why Jesus is the only way to heaven, read *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* by Ravi Zacharias (W Publishing, 2002).
- ▶ **Take action.** Do some research and find a place in your community or state where the gospel is being silenced. Take action to get that policy changed: write to a government official, attend a public meeting and voice your opinion, start a petition, or join a group that works to correct the wrong.



Christians in America and other Western cultures are fortunate that we don't often find ourselves prohibited from sharing the gospel—nor do we find ourselves kneeling on a beach with guns pointed at us. Yet we can still demonstrate the unstoppable courage that has defined so many believers for so long. Will you?

My thoughts

1. http://www.persecution.com/public/newsroom.aspx?story_ID==373535
2. <http://www.lifewayresearch.com/2014/10/28/americans-believe-in-heaven-hell-and-a-little-bit-of-heresy>.

Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLunstoppable**

6

UNSTOPPABLE IMPACT



*What do you enjoy most about
different cultures?*

QUESTION #1

#BSFLunstoppable

THE POINT

The gospel of Jesus Christ can impact any culture.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

If you've ever visited another country, you know things can be different.

- ▶ We've been taught it's rude to stick your tongue out at somebody, but that's actually a polite gesture in Tibet.
- ▶ We shake our heads when we mean "no," and nod our heads when we mean "yes." In Albania, those gestures are reversed.
- ▶ We like ketchup with our French fries, or perhaps a little mustard. The Dutch prefer mayonnaise.

Is one of these approaches better than another? No, just different. But even in this rich variety of preferences and styles, one truth is crucial in any cultural setting: the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel can speak into any culture—and does.

As the world becomes more diverse, we'll encounter different cultures, ethnicities, worldviews, and preferences in everyday life. As we take our final look at the Book of Acts, we'll see that's not a problem; it's an opportunity. The unstoppable gospel can impact any culture for Jesus Christ.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Acts 17:16-18

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was troubled within him 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 and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Then also, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers argued with him. Some said, “What is this pseudo-intellectual 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.

Athens may have been the intellectual center of the world, but it was also a place of idolatry and superstition. Shrines and statues to Greek gods stood at the front door of every house, all around the marketplace, and even at street crossings. Athens alone may have held as many as 3,000 public statues and 30,000 idols. The Roman satirist Petronius Arbiter, who lived at that time, wrote that it was easier to find a god than a man in that city.¹

All this idol worship broke Paul’s heart, but he chose to do something about it. He walked into the Agora—the marketplace—and sparked conversations. At the Agora 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 their lives. Furthermore, they did not believe in life after death.
- 2. Stoic philosophers** were pantheists, believing in an ultimate divine principle that exists throughout all the universe. They believed the way to realize your fullest potential was to live by reason. The Stoics believed they could eliminate suffering through intellectual perfection.

What are the cultures and subcultures in your community?

QUESTION #2

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. To be sure, these philosophers made fun of Paul, labeling him a “pseudo-intellectual.” But Paul was not deterred.

When you know the truth and realize people need to hear it, you just engage, whatever the consequences.

Remember the words of Jesus: “No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:15-16).

Acts 17:22-23

²² Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: “Men 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.”

When we meet someone different from us, we have a choice. We can focus on the differences and keep our distance, or we can find common ground and come together. We can build fences, or we can build bridges.

Paul was a bridge-builder.

When Paul talked about Jesus, some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers tagged him as a blowhard who didn’t know what he was talking about. But others were intrigued. They wanted to hear more. So they escorted Paul to the Areopagus, the Athenian court and the hill where it convened, for a public hearing of sorts.



BUILDING BRIDGES

Paul used an important element of Athenian culture to build a bridge to the gospel. Choose two of the following elements of our culture and record how followers of Christ might build a bridge from that element to the gospel.

Movies

Sports

Reality TV

Music

Books

Video Games

"Then He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.'"

—MARK 16:15

Paul's audience didn't know about Jesus, nor did they believe in one God. Paul had no obvious connecting point to begin a conversation, but he found one: they worshiped, and so did Paul. Granted, they were worshiping the wrong things, but at least they were spiritual seekers. Paul used their spirituality to make a connection.

The construction of an altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" was clearly the Athenians' attempt to make sure they didn't unintentionally forget, and thereby risk offending, one of the gods. Paul used their acknowledgment that there could be a god they didn't know as an opening to introduce them to "The God who made the world and everything in it" (v. 24). Moving forward, he proclaimed the truth about God and His plan to save them.

With the growing diversity in America, most of us rub shoulders daily with people who are very different from us. Separated by language, culture, religion, race, ethnicity, and politics, sometimes it's hard to find common ground. Yet, when you begin to look for a connecting point, you'll find it. Love of family, the pain of loss, hobbies and interests, food, work, health—these are things we all share.

Make it a point to look and listen for bridge-building material.

Acts 17:30-31

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."

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.

What principles and practices can we gain from Paul's approach to sharing the gospel?

QUESTION #3

Why are so many Christians comfortable with remaining silent?

QUESTION #4

During the days of Elisha, the Arameans were at war with Israel. The city of Samaria was under siege and food was scarce (see 2 Kings 6:8,24-25). One day, four lepers, living outside the city because of their disease, decided to go to the Arameans in hopes of finding food. To their astonishment, the Aramean camp was a ghost town. During the night, the Lord had caused the Arameans to flee. They left behind food, clothing, silver, and gold. The four lepers had escaped their dire straits and landed in paradise.

The lepers ate and drank their fill and hid their plunder (see 7:5-8). Then they remembered their kinsmen starving back in the city. "Then they said to each other, 'We're not doing what is right. Today is a day of good news. If we are silent and wait until morning light, our sin will catch up with us. *Let's go tell the king's household*'" (v. 9, emphasis added).

Those of us who know Jesus are a lot like those lepers who found hope. We have found the answer to our deepest need, but it's also the answer to the deepest needs of all those people "back in the city" who don't yet know Jesus as Savior. This is a day of good news! The gospel is too good not to share.

As Paul spoke at the Areopagus, he couched 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 truth of the gospel.

Paul met them on their grounds, brought the truth of Jesus into the conversation, and crossed the finish line in communicating the gospel. The rest was up to God.

How can our group engage one or more of the cultures in our community?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

We have an imperative to take the gospel to the world, but the nations have also come to us. Therefore:

- ▶ **Get educated.** Learn about the different cultures of the people in your community. Ask about their customs, heritage, and beliefs. Attend an ethnic festival or performance. Become a student of different cultures in an effort to start discussions.
- ▶ **Get spiritual.** Follow Paul's example by attending a worship service within a different culture. Seek out common ground in order to build bridges between that culture and Christ.
- ▶ **Get official.** Talk with a staff person at your church about forming a ministry outreach to serve the different cultures in your community.



Yes, things are different in other countries and in other cultures. Those differences are neither bad nor good, yet they present a wonderful opportunity to share the good news about Jesus.

My thoughts



A SHARD OF GLASS

BY RUSSELL MOORE

Next to me on my desk is a shard of glass, small, jagged, rugged. If you were to see it, your first instinct might be to sweep it up and to toss it into the trash. But it's been with me for most of my life now, and it means almost everything to me.

I picked it up off the pavement outside my home church back in Biloxi, Mississippi. A group of us kids were playing ball in front of the church before a Sunday evening service. Somebody threw a ball too close to the building. It hit the window, and the glass rained down all around us. Something in me moved me to kneel down and pick up this remnant, and it's been with me through every stage of my life



Seeing the window at the front of that church shatter disoriented me—and not only because I was afraid that we were going to be called into a swarm of angry deacons. It was also that this sanctuary seemed to me to be the most permanent thing I could imagine—a doorway to the transcendent. Every summer I would march with the other children through those same front doors for the opening ceremonies of Vacation Bible School. ... At the front of the line would stand one of us chosen to carry the American flag. Close behind him would stand another carrying the Christian flag. We would march into the sanctuary as the piano and organ streamed the majestic march “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” ...

That little Mississippi congregation pictured something to me even without words — something that has lingered to this moment Hanging over the American flag, hanging over the Christian flag, hanging over all of us, up there above the baptistery was a cross. That pinewood cross pictured an ancient truth that no government, no emperor, no court, no army, no church could stand above or beside the kingship of the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. ...

As I write this, I sit a block from the United States Capitol in a city gleaming with marble, signifying the greatest political and military power the world has ever known. It all seems so permanent. The shard of glass in my hand reminds me that nothing this side of the New Jerusalem is as unshakeable as we think. ...

The days ahead will probably be quite different than those faced by our parents and grandparents. We will be forced to articulate things we once could assume. That is nothing to wring our hands over. That is no call to retreat or to surrender. ... We may be seen as strange in American culture. If so, onward Christian strangers. ...

In the public square, orthodox, evangelical Christianity has articulated a vision of human dignity, of religious liberty, of family stability—sometimes heroically, though never consistently enough. In that, these Christians sought to remind the church that we are to be the sort of people who recognize justice and righteousness. We should continue the best of that tradition. We should push back against the fallenness and injustice around us and within us.

We live in a world where too many children are disposed of as medical waste and ... where too many persons are trafficked and molested, too many are ravaged by divorce and poverty. ... We ought to stand

then with conviction and contend, as the prophets and apostles did before us, against injustice. But we must do so with voices shaped by the gospel with a convictional kindness that recognizes that winning arguments is not enough if one is in a cosmic struggle with unseen principalities and powers in the air around us.

At the same time, we must recognize that this is a different day. The Bible Belt will not long be a safe haven for “traditional moral values.” ... Let’s not seek to resuscitate the old civil religions. Let’s work, instead, for something new and for something old: the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, gathered in churches of transformed people reconciled to one another, on mission with one another, holding together the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. Let’s avoid the temptation to keep saying the same thing we’ve always said, except louder and angrier. And let’s avoid the temptation of retreating into our subculture or of disentangling the gospel from our concern for human well-being. If we do not surrender to the spirit of the age—and we must not—we will be thought to be culture-warriors. So be it. Let’s be Christ-shaped, Kingdom-first culture warriors.

We all see, the Bible tells us, “through a glass, darkly,” but I find myself looking more and more at the world through that little shard of shattered stained glass. It reminds me of who I am, where I come from, and Who found me there. But it also reminds me of brokenness, of loss, of what it means to live in a universe at war. It reminds me that no matter how rooted we are, we are strangers and aliens still. We are all broken shards of glass, rejected building stones, being fitted into a temple we cannot fully even imagine. The gospel we’ve received isn’t just strange to the culture around us; it’s strange to us too. That’s what makes it good news.

It’s our turn to march into the future. And we do so not as a moral majority or a righteous remnant, but just as crucified sinners with nothing to offer the world but a broken body and spilled blood and unceasing witness. We are strangers and exiles on our best days, but we are not orphans and wanderers. Our strangeness is only hopeful if it is freakishly clinging to the strange, strange mission of Christ crucified and risen. Pursuing righteousness and justice are of no purpose if it doesn’t flow from seeking the kingdom first. Beside us there may be flags, and we’ll pledge allegiance where we ought and where we can. But over, always over us, there’s a cross. We may not always see where we are going, but we know the Way. Onward.

***"We are all broken
shards of glass,
rejected building
stones, being fitted into
a temple we cannot
fully even imagine."***



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