

SHARING JESUS TO OTHER RELIGIONS

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We live in a world with many religions apart from Christianity. Some are polytheistic, some are monotheistic, some _____ and some have no god at all, such as atheism and communism. We are called to witness to people of all of these religions.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
(Matthew 28:18-20, NIV)

Each of these religions will require a different approach, so in this session we cannot deal with specifics but with general principles that can be applied to any situation. If you are not sure how to address a problem a good place to look for an answer is in scripture, and our example of how to share Jesus with others is in Acts 17:16-34. _____ was a great evangelist and spreader of the gospel, arguably the best ever. After he was miraculously converted on the road to Damascus sharing the good news about Jesus was what he spent the rest of his life doing, and ultimately led to his martyrdom for the faith.

Paul spent most of his time preaching to Jews and _____ gentiles, but on his second missionary journey he ended up preaching to completely different people with a range of different beliefs. He went to Thessalonica and preached to the Jews but had to flee as they wanted to attack him. Paul then went to Berea, where the people were much more receptive and wanted to hear what he had to say and people were converted there, but he had to flee this town as well when troublemakers came from Thessalonica. He then ended up in _____.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So, he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything. Rather, He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us. 'For in Him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are His offspring.' "Therefore, since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others. (Acts 17:16-34, NIV)

- Paul was affected by seeing so many idols in the streets, he realised that these people had pagan beliefs that were not Christian, and he was concerned for the spiritual wellbeing of these people.
- Paul, as he usually did, started his work in Athens by going to preach to the Jews and God-fearing gentiles as his first priority, he did not allow his beliefs or his works to be affected by the environment of a different belief system.

- He was also willing to speak to _____ whoever they were or what they believed, in the public square. He made himself available to the people and did not just stick in his comfort zone and deal with people who shared some common beliefs with him.
- The Epicureans followed the teachings of Epicurus, (341-270 BC), and their aim in life was to secure happiness, not through pleasure as such but by seeking tranquility. They did not fear god, as they did not believe in any god(s), and saw death as the end of existence. They sought security through living in communities.
- The _____ followed the teaching of Zeno of Citium, (335-263 BC) and their view was that the universe was permeated by divine reason, which was expressed in human reason, and that men could advance from ignorance to true knowledge and virtue. They made extensive lists of virtues and vices, and had detailed codes on how people should live.
- Paul debated with the Stoics and Epicureans and they did not accept the gospel, but they took him to the high council of the city where he also preached. Paul was willing to speak to anyone about Jesus who would listen.
- Paul started preaching by praising their religiousness: he began with a positive.
- He used the example of an altar to an unknown god to open up to the people about the real God.
- Paul used reason to argue his case, he had the facts and knew what he believed and why.
- Paul quoted from _____ as part of his argument, he knew about the culture he was interacting with. He did not alter the message because of the culture.
- Not everyone accepted what Paul had to say, and some laughed in contempt, but this did not discourage him. The doors were opened for further discussion and some people were saved and became believers.

What Lessons Can We Learn from Paul's Preaching to The Athenians?

- Paul persisted in his efforts to preach the gospel despite persecution, hardship and eventual martyrdom. He faithfully fulfilled the great commission.
- Paul was willing to witness to anyone and everyone, he did not let personal prejudices or preferences limit his ministry.
- He witnessed to others even when he was not familiar with their beliefs; he took time to find out about them. He was very interested in people and this was fundamental to how he witnessed. It can be interesting to debate concepts, philosophy and _____ with people who do not share our beliefs but not many people are converted by that alone. It is reaching out to people, caring for them and loving them that often will reach them. This is a challenge for those of us who are not "people persons".
- Paul was not condemnatory; he started with where people were, not how he thought they should be or where he wished they might be.
- Paul witnessed out of a relationship with people and he used opportunities when they presented themselves. He was always ready to respond to questions about his beliefs and preach the gospel. He was also able to tailor what he said to his audience and circumstances.
- Paul found out about the beliefs and customs of those he witnessed to, which gave him credibility. He also sought common ground but did not allow this to compromise his position or the message that he was preaching.
- Paul accepted that not everyone he preached to would believe what he said, but he did not let discouragement stop him preaching. He also seems to have remained in good relationship with those who did not believe. Where there was a breakdown this was instigated by others who were unhappy with what he said.
- He used his _____ where this was appropriate. No one can argue with your testimony even though they may not like it.
- Never underestimate the importance of the seed that is sown. Paul often did not see the fruit that came from the seed he had sown, and it can be the same for us. We may sow seed now that comes to fruition years later and is never seen by us, but if we do not sow the seed, we can be sure that there will be no harvest.
- Like Paul we are called upon to enact the great commission. It is a responsibility we must take seriously when we deal with the people in our lives, no matter who they are.

To show Jesus to people of different faiths we must first love them, this is done by establishing relationships with them first and caring for them and finding out about them as people, as well as about their beliefs. We need to do our research and be ready to give an account of our faith and what it means to us. We should be ready to answer their questions and point them towards the truth. We should not try and engage in arguments or debates to "score points", but rather to lead them towards the truth about Jesus. Then we will be fulfilling the great commission that Jesus has entrusted to us.