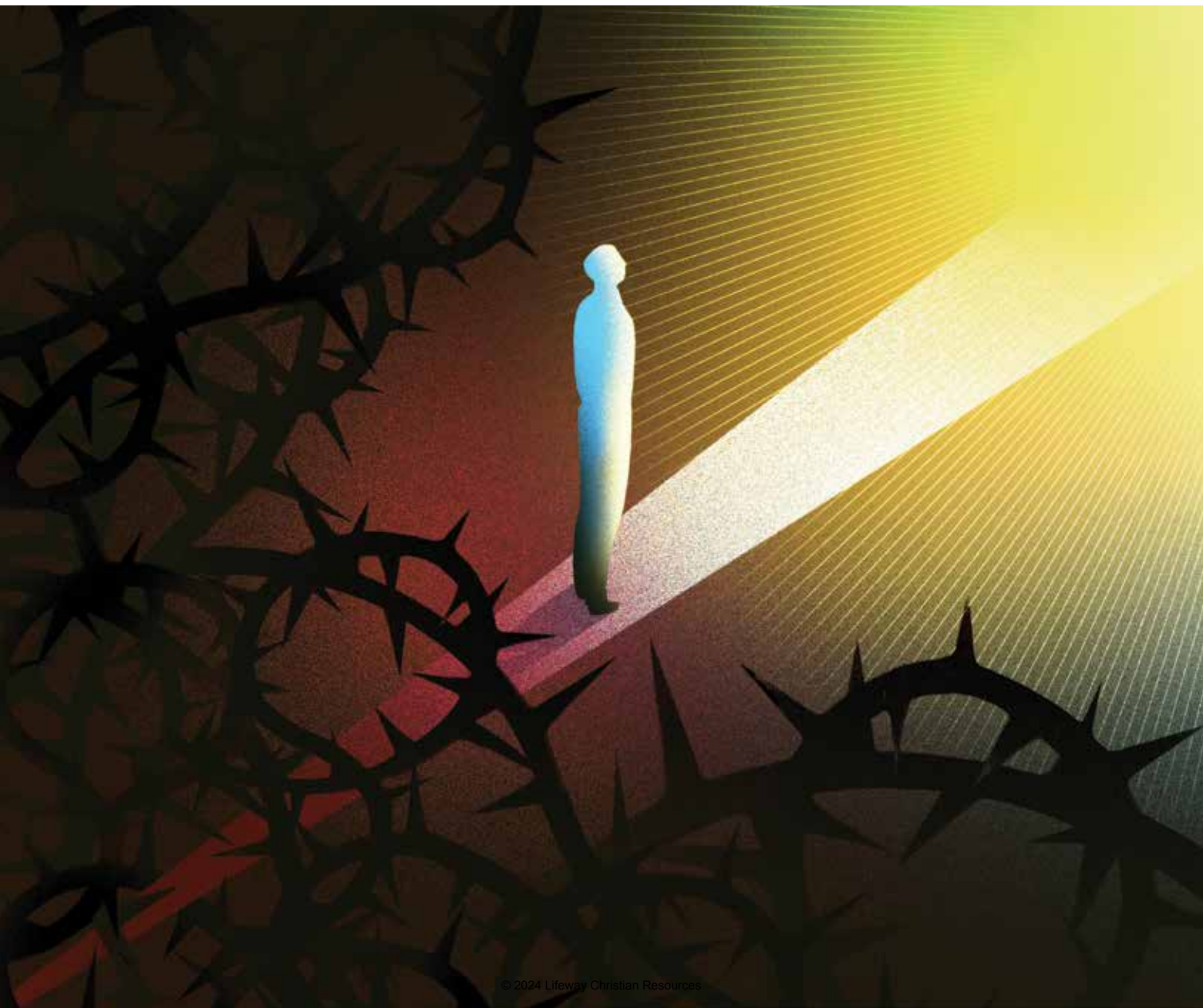




the**GOSPEL**PROJECT.

FROM THIS WORLD TO THE WORLD TO COME

ADULTS / LEADER GUIDE / SUMMER 2024 / VOL. 12 / ESV



GOD'S WORD TO YOU

THE GOOD NEWS THAT AWAITS US

“And they all lived happily ever after.”

This is the coda, the postscript that punctuates the tales of our childhoods. The prince is victorious. The dragon is defeated. The princess is rescued. The struggle is over. The battle is won. And finally, “they all lived happily ever after.”

The Bible has its coda as well. But unlike the happily-ever-afters of fairy tales, this is one of expectation—not for the end to come but for the next chapter to be written. A promise summarized in three words: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). This is the promise the entire story of Scripture builds toward. It is the deepest longing of the heart of God’s people. The first man and woman longed for the coming of the Son, the One whose heel would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Abraham longed for the promised Offspring through whom all nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:3,7). David longed to see his Lord, the Son who would sit on the throne of an unfading kingdom (Ps. 110:1). God’s people in exile and return longed for the coming of the Servant who would restore them (Isa. 49:6-7).

Then the long-expected One came—Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Son of Eve, the Son of God—bringing redemption and peace with God by humbling Himself to the point of death and then being exalted in His resurrection (Phil. 2:8-11).

News of the reconciliation Jesus offered spread throughout the world. People of every tribe and tongue and nation believed and trusted Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. And as this good news continued to spread, the promise spread with it—the promise that tells of the day when Jesus returns to make all things new. When every tear will be wiped from every eye. When suffering, sadness, and death will be no more. In their place will be joy, gladness, and life everlasting as God dwells with His people forevermore.

But for now, we wait. And as we do, we join with our brothers and sisters across the centuries as we long for that day to come, echoing these words: “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!”

CONTENTS

	The Editor	4
	The Writers	5
	4 Essentials for Starting New Groups	6
<p><small>SUGGESTED FOR THE WEEK OF</small></p>		
<p>UNIT 34: AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST</p>		
	Introduction	8
June 2	Session 1 Prioritizing the Gospel (Acts 15)	10
June 9	Session 2 Explaining the Gospel (Acts 17)	22
June 16	Session 3 Safeguarding the Gospel (Acts 18–19)	34
June 23	Session 4 Advancing the Gospel (Doctrine: Mission of the Church)	46
<p>UNIT 35: THAT I MAY GAIN CHRIST</p>		
	Introduction	56
June 30	Session 1 Enduring with God’s Perspective (Acts 20–22)	58
July 7	Session 2 Enduring with God’s Presence (Acts 22–23)	70
July 14	Session 3 Enduring with God’s Promises (Acts 24–26)	82
July 21	Session 4 Enduring with God’s People (Acts 27–28)	92
July 28	Session 5 Enduring with God’s Purpose (Acts 28)	104
Aug. 4	Session 6 Endurance and Christ’s Exaltation (Doctrine: Christ’s Exaltation)	116
<p>UNIT 36: A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH</p>		
	Introduction	126
Aug. 11	Session 1 Worshipping Our Resurrected Lamb (Revelation 4–5)	128
Aug. 18	Session 2 Worshipping Our Conquering King (Revelation 19–20)	140
Aug. 25	Session 3 Worshipping Our Glorious God (Doctrine: New Heaven and New Earth)	152
	NEW Scope and Sequence	162

THE EDITOR

We've come to the end of the greatest story ever told and, of course, the good guys win! From Genesis through Revelation, we've seen sin enter the earth, but God already had a rescue plan on the ready. And as His people were faithful, then were not, then came back, then backed away, it was like a love story gone awry of faithfulness and unfaithfulness on the part of humanity. But God Himself was always faithful. God was always true, merciful, forgiving, and loving. What He promised always came true. Salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ, through His crucifixion and resurrection, was the climax of the story. Victory was won at that moment, but full victory would be realized when Christ comes back again.

In the meantime, like Paul and the other disciples, we are to tell the story of this good news of victory over sin and death. And we endure in doing so, even in suffering and trials and persecution, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is true and souls are in the balance. Our life's mission should be to share and testify to Christ crucified, that others may have the opportunity to receive and believe in His name. They may or may not, but those results are between them and God. We are still to share with others, through our words and our lives, the truth of how God has redeemed and restored us to be part of His family, as children loved by Him.

Then when Jesus returns, we will continue to worship Him like the angels and heavenly creatures. For we will be rewarded with His presence forevermore, thus experiencing joy upon joy upon joy. Our forever home is waiting with our forever Father. And that is great news indeed!

Y Bonesteele

Content Editor

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Ed Stetzer and Trevin Wax
Founding Editors

Daniel Davis
Team Leader

Y Bonesteele
Content Editor

Rachel Myrick
Content and Production Editor

Dwayne McCrary
Manager, Adult Ongoing Bible Studies

John Paul Basham
Director, Adult Ministry

Ken Braddy
Director of Sunday School

Send questions/comments to:

Team Leader by email to daniel.davis@lifeway.com or mail to Team Leader, The Gospel Project: Adult Leader Guide, 200 Powell Place, Suite 100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7707; or make comments on the web at lifeway.com.

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THE WRITERS

Matthew Z. Capps (Unit 36 Introduction) serves as the lead pastor of Fairview Baptist Church in Apex, NC. Capps earned a M.Div. with Biblical Languages from Southeastern Seminary, a D.Min. in Pastoral Theology from Gordon-Conwell and is a Ph.D. candidate at Ridley College (Melbourne). Matt and Laura have three children.

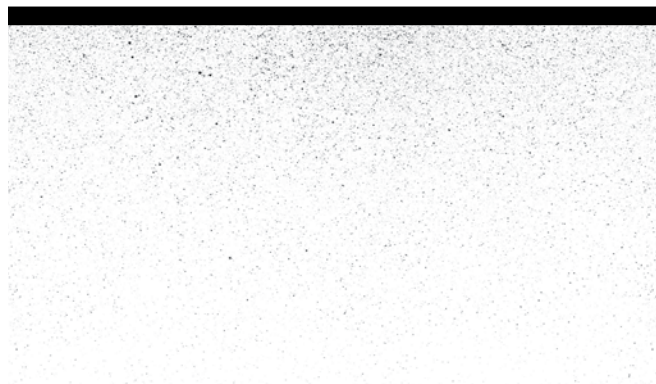
Andrew Hall (Unit 34, Sessions 1-4) is the lead pastor of Community Bible Church, located in Ilderton, Ontario, Canada. He is a graduate from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Melanie, have four children.

Leslie Hudson (Unit 35, Sessions 1-6) loves her mornings of silence, coffee, and Jesus—not in that order. She lives with her husband and kids in White Bluff, Tennessee, where they raise blueberries, figs, and bees. She loves to spend her free time reading, writing, journaling, and helping others know and follow Jesus.

Kevin M. Jones, Sr. (Unit 34 Introduction) serves as the dean of the School of Education at Cedarville University. In addition, he serves as the managing editor of The Gospel Project. He started his teaching career as a first grade teacher in Lexington, Kentucky. He and his high school sweetheart, Demica, have three children: Kennedi, Kevin Jr., and Karsynn. He serves as a lay pastor at St. John Missionary Baptist Church in Springfield, Ohio, where they live.

Daniel Ritchie (Unit 35 Introduction) is an evangelist, speaker, and author from Raleigh, North Carolina. He's written two books: *My Affliction for His Glory* and *Endure*. He has spoken both nationally and internationally for churches, schools, colleges, seminaries, corporations, and professional sports teams. You can visit him online at danielritchie.com.

Matt Rogers (Unit 36, Sessions 1-3) is the pastor of Christ Fellowship Cherrydale in Greenville, South Carolina. He and his wife, Sarah, have five children: Corrie, Avery, Hudson, Willa, and Fuller. Matt is also an assistant professor of church planting at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, the church development coordinator with the Pillar Network, and a freelance author.



4 ESSENTIALS FOR STARTING NEW GROUPS

by Ken Braddy

I am a group leader just like you. Over the last few years, my wife and I have started two new groups. As a former full-time discipleship pastor, I led the churches I served to start new groups regularly. Two of the three churches I served developed the fastest-growing group ministries in two different states. Starting new groups is important—even vital—to the overall health of our churches. Sadly, most of our churches are not starting enough new groups.

Let's change that.

I cannot assume that you are on board with the idea of starting new groups. In every church I've served, I've had group leaders say things to me like, "Don't split my group!" or "Don't ask us to start a new group—you'll ruin the fellowship we've worked hard to create." I hope this is not your attitude when it comes to starting new groups. Somehow the idea of "permanence" has crept into many groups. We wrongly believe that our goal is to stay together until Jesus comes back. It's not. Nor is my group "my group." Every group—and every group member—belongs to Jesus. It's His church. It's His groups. You and I are simply shepherd-teachers, stewards of God's most precious possessions—His people. The room we meet in isn't ours, nor are the people in our group. They are God's sheep.

Here is what I know: Healthy things grow, and growing things change. If you are leading your Bible study group well, part of that leadership will be to guide the people to embrace the mission of reaching people for Christ. That mission will result in the planting of new groups out of yours. Every new group that is properly planted will reach ten new people on average. What would happen to your church if you and other group leaders planted three new groups this year? You'd reach at least thirty

new people who are not currently connected to a group like yours. Five new groups would reach fifty new people. God would be pleased as you obey the Great Commission.

In my experience over these past thirty years, there are four essentials when it comes to starting new groups. See if you can identify with these.

1: AN APPRENTICE WHO WANTS TO PLANT A NEW GROUP

Almost every Bible study group has a substitute teacher. What the group needs is an apprentice teacher! Subs step in and teach when the group leader is not available; a sub fills the immediate short-term need. On the other hand, an apprentice leader has volunteered to be trained and to ultimately lead a group. An apprentice sees the long-term need for new groups and has embraced that mission. If you don't have an apprentice, you're not going to start a new group. This person is essential.

2: A GROUP THAT UNDERSTANDS AND SUPPORTS THE STRATEGY

Every group ultimately turns inward. It's a fact of group life. Effective group leaders make certain that the mission of reaching people for Christ and for church membership stays at the forefront of the group's mission. The longer a group has been together, the greater the intensity that is required on the leader's part to keep the group excited about the planting of new groups. Many groups believe they exist for the group members, and that's half true. They also exist to connect with people who are far from God. Understanding and supporting the strategy of starting new groups rests with the group leader. It must be prayed for, talked about, and celebrated when it happens.

One sour group leader can torpedo an entire group of people who support the starting of a new group.

3: A CULTURE OF CELEBRATION AND NAVIGATION

It's true that we repeat what is rewarded. As we lead our groups to start new ones, we must celebrate the birth of a new group. Celebrating the good work of starting a new group sends a powerful message to the people that they are on mission with God and are doing kingdom work. But at the same time, we must navigate. As your group starts new ones, your people will feel a sense of loss. One author of change management calls this "the neutral zone"—the place of transition between what the people have known to the new reality. Effective group leaders help their people navigate their feelings of sadness and loss, while simultaneously helping them accept the new normal.

4: THE RIGHT TIMING

There is an axiom that says timing is everything. That's certainly true when it comes to starting new groups. If any of the following circumstances are being experienced in your Bible study group, it's time to plant a new one.

- **When a group has been together for two years or more.** It's really hard for guests to break into groups that have been together longer than twenty-four months because relationships have formed among the members and to a guest, it can feel "cliquish." When a group approaches its second birthday, it's time to think, "Let's start a new group."
- **When a group fills the meeting space to over eighty percent of capacity.** When a group exceeds eight percent of its seating



capacity, the room begins to feel crowded. Overcrowding becomes an excuse for people to skip group meetings.

- **When the age span of group members exceeds ten years.** The author of the book *Revitalizing the Sunday Morning Dinosaur* stated that the "homogeneity principle" is always in effect in group ministry: People who are similar must be placed together. The wider the age span, the less in common the people will have with one another.

Group Leader, let's lead well by guiding our groups to start new ones. Hold your people with a loose grip. Encourage them, release them, and bless them as they become "missionaries to adults" in your community through the strategy of starting new groups.

Ken Braddy is Lifeway's Director of Sunday School and host of *Disciple-making in Community* Podcast. Check out his latest book *Breakthrough: Creating a New Scorecard for Group Ministry Success* at lifeway.com.

AMBASSADORS

FOR CHRIST

“Unity in the Faith”

+

by Kevin M. Jones, Sr.

Did you know there are people who represent you and the interest of your nation to other nations? These men and women represent the collective voice of a government or people. They are called ambassadors. Although they hold citizenship for one nation, ambassadors are usually placed either short or long term in another nation. Ambassadors must know their nation intimately, maintain the interest of their nation, spread the message of their nation, advance the mission of their home nation, and work for peace between nations. This is not a small task. Many ambassadors have lost their lives in dedication to their mission. As believers we are called to do some of the same work as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:20. Our work as ambassadors is for the kingdom of Christ.

KNOW THE MISSION

We have been called and equipped by the power of the Holy Spirit to do the work of God as His ambassadors. God makes His appeal through us—human beings who were once sinners but are now citizens of a heavenly kingdom. God uses us to point people to the reality of His existence, care, love, peace, patience, and the gift of His grace. Never forget how significant you are to the work of God. Sharing the gospel is the work of an ambassador. Men and women need to understand that they

are not at peace with God—even if they are unaware of their rebellion—unless they have accepted His gift of grace. Sadly, Satan’s job is to kill, steal, and to destroy; he does everything he can to distract believers from their task and numb unbelievers to their need for the gospel.

KNOW THE KING YOU SERVE

To be an ambassador of Christ, you must have knowledge of King Jesus and the kingdom you serve. We acquire the knowledge of our King through reading Scripture, personal devotion, prayer, and fellowship with believers. God has called believers from every nation, tribe, tongue, and ethnic group. We must be especially careful not to get distracted by this earthly kingdom where we reside that, if we are not careful, can sometimes feel like our true home. I am not saying we should not care about the world in which we live; I am saying that the kingdom of Christ is far superior to the current city, state, or nation where we hold citizenship.

REFLECT KINGDOM BEHAVIOR

It is our job as ambassadors to maintain the interest that Jesus Christ set in motion before His ascension. We should be concerned with the physical and spiritual protection of Christians in

our community and at large. We should have a heightened sense of awareness for unbelievers and be just as concerned about their physical and spiritual well-being. It is also our job as ambassadors to maintain integrity, closely tied to the cultural identity of Christians. Galatians 5:22-24 describes how God's people should act, namely, bearing the fruit of the Spirit. These are just a few of the attributes a Christians should model. So when we think about being an ambassador, here are three tasks ambassadors should be doing:

I suspect that many of us spend far more time tending to the needs of our temporal home than we do focusing on our eternal home.

1. The ambassador for Christ spreads the good news. Paul described Satan as the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4) with a clear mission to blind unbelievers to their sin in a world riddled with godlessness, debauchery, lust, lying, jealousy, envy, murder, and more. Never forget the gospel and its power to reconcile sinners to God. Remind yourself of it daily. Tell others of the gospel daily.

2. A good ambassador represents the goodwill of their home. Although no worldly nation is perfect, their ambassadors try to make their home seem as close to perfect as possible. For Christ's ambassadors, the advantage we have is the love we share with one another which can be clearly seen by those around us. While we sometimes struggle to maintain perfect unity, Christ said the world would know us by our love for one another (John 13:35). Have you shown love to another believer today?

3. An ambassador remembers the placement is temporary. Our citizenship is in heaven, and Christ's ambassadors do not forget that. I suspect that many of us spend far more time tending to the needs of our temporal home than we do focusing on our eternal home. Many of us spend time worrying about the rights we have as citizens in our residence. We must be diligent to keep our minds on the things above, else we will get continually distracted with civilian affairs, which Paul warned Timothy against (2 Tim. 2:4).

4. Christian ambassadors promote peace. Peace is found in the presence of God. It is found when we are in harmony and unity with God's Word, the Holy Spirit, and other believers. Paul said that God's business has always been about reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19). We must plead with unbelievers to come and find rest from their burdens and struggles in Christ alone (Matt. 11:28; Rom. 5:1).

Be an ambassador for Christ. Know God intimately. Serve your local church and churches abroad. Spread the gospel and advance the mission of the church. Do this until Christ returns and we go home to be with Him forever.



PRIORITIZING THE GOSPEL

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The church experiences division in applying the gospel (Acts 15:1-5).
2. The church exercises wisdom in affirming the gospel (Acts 15:6-11,22-29).
3. The church encourages unity in advancing the gospel (Acts 15:30-35).

Background Passage: Acts 15

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

When questions arose about the gospel, the early church gathered to clarify that justification is through faith alone, affirming a core doctrine that unites all of God's people.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

The Jerusalem Council met to resolve a dispute in the early church: was faith in Christ sufficient for justification and inclusion into God's people? The early church's response affirmed the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for justification. Because of His finished work on the cross, Jesus alone is all we need to be saved.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been saved by grace through faith and not by works, we proclaim the gospel message to everyone that justification is available through faith in Christ alone.

GROUP TIME

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.



INTRODUCTION

ASK: As participants arrive, give them a sheet of paper and a writing utensil. Ask them to take a moment and draw a picture of a conflict. Some may draw pictures of personal conflicts; others may draw pictures of international conflicts. Ask each person to share their picture. Ask: **What came to mind when you were asked to draw a picture of conflict?** (wait for a volunteer to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: Conflicts happen for many reasons. Sometimes people feel passionate about different things. Other times people feel wronged. Still others disagree because they have different values or priorities. In the early church, the growth of the church brought new challenges as to what should be primary in the mission of the gospel to the Gentiles.

SUMMARIZE: Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- As the church grew, people from non-Jewish backgrounds were coming to faith in Jesus Christ. At first, Cornelius believed under Peter's ministry. Then persecution caused believers to scatter and bring the gospel to Hellenists (Acts 11:20-21). Then Paul and Barnabas brought the gospel from Antioch throughout Asia Minor. Now the church had to deal with an important question: do you first have to become Jewish to follow Jesus? This question created a great conflict among believers who wanted to be faithful to the Bible.



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POINT 1

THE CHURCH EXPERIENCES DIVISION IN APPLYING THE GOSPEL (ACTS 15:1-5).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 15:1-5** from his or her Bible.

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” **2** And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. **3** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. **4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. **5** But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

LIST: When conflict arises in churches, it is often over matters of taste and opinion. Invite the group to brainstorm what kinds of issues cause churches to divide. Avoid discussing the issues but merely highlight the types of disagreements that can occur in a church.

EXPLAIN: Use **PACK ITEM 2: PAUL’S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS MAP** and **PACK ITEM 3: PAUL’S MISSIONARY LIFE** to show and summarize where Paul and Barnabas had gone on their first trip. After ending back in Antioch, disputes arose. Discuss **verses 1-2** with the main idea below (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 22):

Any time we attempt to add to the good news of Jesus Christ, we do not improve it but dilute its power.

- As Gentiles received the gospel, the center of Christianity was shifting from Jerusalem to Syrian Antioch. The inclusion of people from other ethnicities and races created a question about what was required to be saved. Did someone have to be circumcised, or was faith in Jesus Christ alone sufficient? Was Jesus’s death sufficient for someone to be justified, or was keeping the law necessary?
- Barnabas had seen God working among the Gentiles (Acts 11:23), and upon hearing the opinion from others from Judea, Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed with them about what saved someone. Jewish believers from the Pharisee party thought someone had to believe in Jesus Christ and be circumcised.
- As a result of this conflict, the church in Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and some other trusted believers to go to Jerusalem to bring



PAUL’S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul with Barnabas traveled from Syrian Antioch to Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch, then to Iconium and Lystra. After that, they went to Derbe; then sailed back to Syrian Antioch, leading us here.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is already done.”¹

—Martin Luther (1483–1546)

the matter before the apostles and elders there, and to seek some clarification and resolution on what was required to be saved.

ASK: (DDG p. 22)

From Day 1 in the DDG: **What types of works do people add to the gospel?** (reading the Bible; evangelizing; homeschooling; holding opinions about vaccines or politics; these things aren't wrong, but they don't save either)

READ: Keep **verses 3-5** in mind as a volunteer reads the key doctrine in their DDG (p. 22).

Key Doctrine #47: The Gospel: The Bible teaches that the gospel is both an event and a story. First, it is an event that took place at a specific point in history, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the redemption of sinners (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 5:21). Second, the gospel is also the story of redemption that God has planned since “before the foundations of the earth” (Eph. 1:4), which runs through Scripture, and which culminates in a restored and redeemed creation—a new heaven and new earth where sin, death, and suffering will never again plague humanity, and God’s people will live with Him forever (Isa. 25:8; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21). The event and story do not exist apart from or in conflict with one another, but together inspire us to a life of devotion and mission.

- As the Antioch delegation traveled to Jerusalem, they shared reports to the other churches how God was saving Gentiles. This news caused great joy. Upon their reception in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the twelve apostles and the elders and began their report about the work that had taken place by the gracious work of God through them.
- Some believers from the Pharisee party, however, spoke up. They affirmed faith in Jesus, but they were also fully devoted to the Mosaic Law. As the church was in its beginning and still growing, issues of theology and doctrine were still being discussed. Jesus had not come to abolish the law but fulfill it (see Matt. 5:17-20), so these believers of the Pharisee party were arguing that circumcision was still necessary.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 22)

How do you guard yourself from adding to the gospel? (by studying and knowing Scripture well enough to know what the gospel says; by trusting in God’s power and strength in my walk with God and not my own; by preaching the gospel to myself every day)

TRANSITION: As the church grappled with the gospel, they agreed they should affirm Christ’s saving work regardless of their background.

POINT 2

THE CHURCH EXERCISES WISDOM IN AFFIRMING THE GOSPEL (ACTS 15:6-11,22-29).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 15:6-11** from his or her Bible.

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. **7** And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, **9** and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. **10** Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

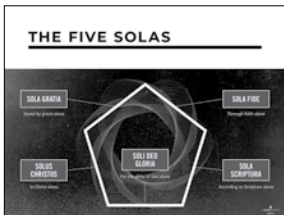
EXPLAIN: Use **verses 6-11** to explain the following as you draw attention to **PACK ITEM 4: THE FIVE SOLAS** in describing faith (DDG p. 22):

Peter affirmed that faith is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for all, Jews and Gentiles alike.

- Together, the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church considered the dilemma: do Gentiles need to submit to the law of Moses for salvation? Peter stood up to speak as a confirming voice to what Paul and Barnabas experienced.
- Peter recounted God’s sovereign choice to bring faith to the Gentiles through the preaching of the gospel. Peter recounted how there were both external evidence that the Gentiles believed—the Holy Spirit (v. 8)—and the internal work of God in the heart (v. 9). Just as the Jews received the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), so Gentiles like Cornelius received the Spirit (Acts 10). By this evidence, Peter pointed out that God does not make distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, circumcised or uncircumcised.
- Instead of burdening the Gentiles with the law of Moses that Israel had failed to obey (Ex. 15:22-27; 17:2,7), Peter appealed to grace, the saving power for Jew and Gentile alike. Gentiles are free from the burden of the law by the grace of Christ, since no one can keep the law perfectly.

ASK: (DDG p. 23)

How does God’s grace work so that we might believe the gospel? (God chose [Eph. 1:3-5]; God knows the heart [Jer. 20:12]; God testified [Acts 10:42]; God gave [1 John 5:11]; God cleansed [1 Cor. 6:11]; God made no distinction [Rom. 3:22; 10:12])



READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 15:22-29** from his or her Bible.

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, **23** with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. **24** Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, **25** it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, **26** men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **27** We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. **28** For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: **29** that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

HIGHLIGHT: Discuss **verses 22-29** and the following main idea (DDG p. 23):

The church in unity and wisdom affirmed that faith is in Christ alone to not burden the Gentile believers.

- The apostles, elders, and the entire church took two steps to affirm the gospel. First, they unanimously selected representatives to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. Second, they sent a letter confirming the decision by the council.
- Verse 25 suggests that all members were in full agreement. Verse 28 says the Holy Spirit and elders confirmed that God justifies Gentiles by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The letter spelled out what actions Gentiles should avoid (v. 29) so that those who were new to the faith might not have troubled consciences (v. 24). As Darrell Bock commented, "This is not about salvation but about what is necessary to maintain positive fellowship with each other."²

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 23)

How do we help others grow in Christ without burdening them? (by affirming salvation is through Christ alone, but trusting Him means wanting to know Him and serve Him; by presenting ministry/service options without guilt; by knowing God is working in people)

TRANSITION: The church continued to advance the gospel message to all people as they grew in the knowledge of God's grace.

POINT 3

THE CHURCH ENCOURAGES UNITY IN ADVANCING THE GOSPEL (ACTS 15:30-35).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 15:30-35** from his or her Bible.

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. **31** And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. **33** And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. **35** But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

HIGHLIGHT: In groups of 3-4, highlight all of the verbs in this passage (sent, went, gathered, delivered, read, rejoiced, encouraged, strengthened, taught, preached). Different people in the church had different roles, but they all did their roles to strengthen and encourage one another.

TEACH: Using **verses 30-31**, teach the following idea (DDG p. 23):

Because of their unity in the gospel, the church acted faithfully to continue in the mission of proclaiming Christ.

- After receiving the letter from the Jerusalem Council, the Antioch delegation returned to Antioch with the good news. They gathered the church, making sure they were all together, to deliver the letter. After reading the letter, the church rejoiced because it was good news indeed.
- Their joy and encouragement was that the Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised and become Jewish in order to trust in Christ. Salvation was in Christ alone.
- Further, we can assume that the two requirements that the council had set out were probably not seen as a burden by the Antioch church, but rather things that they had already submitted to or were ready and willing to submit to.
- By being willing to accept the council's letter, the Gentile believers showed that they were willing to keep the recommendations in order to help further the mission of the gospel to Jews and Gentiles and to maintain unity within the church between believing Jews and Gentiles.

ACTS 15:34

Omitted from modern-day Bible translations because its prior inclusion and translation were based on manuscripts that were late and inconsistent with earlier manuscripts that did not have this verse. It was most likely added by scribes, not by Luke himself.

ASK: (DDG p. 23)

What steps can you take to stand for gospel unity? (consider the issues that divide Christians; be prepared to discuss subjects with other people to understand their point of view; try to distinguish between disputable matters of conscience and matters that are central to the gospel; when disputes arise, be slow to become angry and be quick to listen; be ready to stand up for the truth in a gracious way)

EXPLAIN: Use **verses 32-35** to highlight how the messengers who accompanied the letter were not only delivery men of the news but also believers—“prophets”—who showed tender care to believers so that the church would be unified despite their differences (DDG p. 23):

By caring for the Gentile and Jewish believers, the Jerusalem church brought the church together and strengthened their faith.

- After delivering the letter, Silas and Judas strengthened the Antioch believers by sharing a message of encouragement. When they had completed their ministry, the church sent them on their way in peace, showing that what looked like a potential division at the beginning of these events ended in unification of the Jewish and Gentile believers.
- While Judas and Silas left, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the Word of the Lord. With these disputes resolved, the door had been opened for the church to move forward in proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.
- By settling a theological dispute, the Jerusalem Council had furthered the gospel and unified the church to be about the mission of Christ—to proclaim the gospel to those who had yet to hear of Him.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 23)

How can we encourage others toward more unity? (celebrating differences and diversity; uniting not only in your local church, but among churches in your community; majoring on the majors and minoring on the minors)

TRANSITION: Understanding the gospel should bring Christians together so that God is glorified and the church is built up in faith and mission.

MY RESPONSE

SAY: The Jerusalem Council met to resolve a dispute in the early church: was faith in Christ sufficient for justification and inclusion into God's people? The early church's response affirmed the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for justification. Because of His finished work on the cross, Jesus alone is all we need to be saved. Because we have been saved by grace through faith and not by works, we proclaim the gospel message to everyone that justification is available through faith in Christ alone.

HEAD:

Because of Christ's finished work on the cross, we are saved by Jesus Christ alone. We can tell the gospel to any person and have confidence that God can save sinners. No one is beyond the grace of God, and no one is too good for the grace of God. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

What questions do you have about the gospel that you need to grow in understanding?

HEART:

Jesus is sufficient to save. Nothing else has to be added to give us right standing before God. Therefore, we can rejoice in Jesus Christ, giving our hearts in full devotion and adoration to Him. As others come to Christ, we rejoice with them and glorify God.

How can you increase your joy in the Lord today?

HANDS:

Justification by faith alone means that even the worst sinner is not too far from God's grace and the best person still needs the same forgiveness in Jesus's name. Jesus saves sinners, and we have confidence that God will bring people to know His glorious and saving power in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Whom can you pray for and proclaim Christ to this week?

PRAY: Lord, thank You for the grace of the gospel. Thank You that You welcome and receive sinners who turn from their ways and trust in Your Son for eternal life. As we are united to Christ, help us not put up any barriers to others so that the good news would go to the ends of the earth. In Jesus's name, amen.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood To every believer the promise of God; The vilest offender who truly believes, That moment from Jesus a pardon receives."³

—Fanny Crosby
(1820–1915)

EXTRA

POINT 1: THE CHURCH EXPERIENCES DIVISION IN APPLYING THE GOSPEL (ACTS 15:1-5).

+ COMMENTARY

“The issue can be clarified by a series of questions. Is the sinner saved by the sheer grace of God in and through Christ crucified, when he or she simply believes, that is, flees to Jesus for refuge? Has Jesus Christ by his death and resurrection done everything necessary for salvation? Or are we saved partly through the grace of Christ and partly through our own good works and religious performance? Is justification sola fide, ‘by faith alone’, or through a mixture of faith and works, grace and law, Jesus and Moses? Are Gentile believers a sect of Judaism, or authentic members of a multi-national family? It was not some Jewish cultural practices which were at stake, but the truth of the gospel and the future of the church.”⁴

+ ILLUSTRATION

Imagine receiving the world’s largest diamond as a gift, or being offered it for a few dollars. What would the difference be? While it might seem that there is very little difference, receiving an expensive item as a gift shows great love, generosity, and indicates that there are no strings attached. But upon receiving the world’s largest diamond for a few dollars, one might become skeptical, even cynical of the item. Is it genuine? What is the motivation for me to receive this priceless item for such a dramatically reduced rate? Might there be deception going on? Is there something else going on of which I am unaware?

The gospel comes to us as a gift. It is given without an expectation of payment or obligation. But when the law is mixed in with the gospel for one to be saved, the gift is no longer free and without cost, but requires something to be given for the item. Any price attached to an item no longer makes it a gift, but something else.

+ ILLUSTRATION

Sometimes a little mistake can result in big distortions. If you are traveling somewhere and you are one degree off course, after one foot you will miss your target by 0.2 inches. That seems insignificant. After 100 yards, you will be just over 5 feet off course. After one mile, a one degree error will result in you missing your target by over 90 feet.

EXTRA

Now consider how problematic it would be for an airline pilot to be off by one degree from New York to San Francisco. At the end of the trip, the plane would be off course by 6 miles. And the further you would travel, the greater you would miss your target.

Small mistakes can have big consequences. What seems insignificant now can be disastrous later on. Little mistakes in our understanding of the gospel are not mere theological trivialities, but can be the matter of life and death. Getting the gospel right requires us to be wise and skillful.

POINT 2: THE CHURCH EXERCISES WISDOM IN AFFIRMING THE GOSPEL (ACTS 15:6-11,22-29).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“The other apostles had stayed in Jerusalem, and they had not worked out the implications of the gospel for Gentiles who were converting from paganism. They simply had not confronted most of these issues practically. It would have been extremely easy for them to miss the implications of the gospel when it came to living as a Gentile Christian. It would have felt natural for them to say: Of course all Christians should eat kosher! or something similar. But the ramifications of such a ‘small’ mistake would have been enormous. There would have been two opposing parties within Christianity that were hostile to each other on the fundamental point of whether we need to add external behaviors to internal belief in Christ in order to be saved.”⁵

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Spend any amount of time in the kitchen and you know that the process of baking is not merely a hobby but an act of chemistry. Every ingredient in a loaf of bread is necessary to produce a light, fluffy loaf of tasty bread. Add too much salt and it will dry out the yeast and bacteria, preventing the bread from rising. Leave out the salt and the dough will rise too quickly, resulting in a weaker structure to the bread. Without sugar, bread becomes dry and loses its taste. Add too much and the dough will take away moisture for the yeast to do its work in rising. Baking is the perfect balance of every ingredient in order to produce a perfect loaf.

The good news of Jesus Christ is not like baking a loaf of bread. It does not require the right amount of every ingredient. There is no need for a dash of the law of Moses with a sprinkling of the Ten Commandments mixed with a good dose of faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, it simply requires faith in Jesus Christ alone. Add any other ingredient to the gospel and the saving power is not enhanced but collapses. Jesus Christ plus nothing else is the gospel remedy for salvation. Add anything else—even a little bit—and the gospel message is diluted. But pure faith in the perfect Savior is the only recipe for one to be reconciled to a holy and perfect God.

POINT 3: THE CHURCH ENCOURAGES UNITY IN ADVANCING THE GOSPEL (ACTS 15:30-35).

+ COMMENTARY

“The church celebrated the letter’s encouragement (Acts 15:31). That the believers in Antioch sent Jerusalem’s agents back to Jerusalem ‘in peace’ (15:33) shows that the decision was acceptable not only in Jerusalem but in Antioch as well. Luke does not portray Jerusalem as imposing its will unilaterally and the churches as simply submitting to it; the Spirit that led the Jerusalem church (15:28) was leading the other churches as well (cf. 13:1). The ‘rejoicing’ here fits the response of other Diaspora churches to the Gentile mission in 15:3; joy was a sign of the Spirit’s activity in the church (13:52; cf. 8:39; also in Paul, cf. Rom 14:17; 15:13; Gal 5:22; 1 Thess 1:6). Although Luke, narrating adventures, focuses on difficulties, he favors the state of the church as being at peace, instead of troubled, and receiving ‘encouragement’ (Acts 9:31).”⁶

+ OPTIONAL ACTIVITY

Guide a volunteer from the group to take a table tennis ball and try to toss it into a small pail. Move the pail some distance away so that it is a challenge. First instruct the volunteer to use their dominant hand and both eyes. Then ask them to use their non-dominant hand and close the opposing eye (if the person is right-handed, they will use their left hand and close their right eye). Ask them which one felt easier.

For most people, using their dominant hand and both eyes will be much easier than using their non-dominant hand. Explain that when we are using all of our bodies in cooperation (our genetic make-up, our sight, our strength, and our development in skills), we are more likely to complete the task successfully.

While this example is limited in its application, what it does show is our need to have all the parts of the body working together. Just as Paul would commend the body for working together with all of its parts in 1 Corinthians 12, so it is with the church. When we work independently or value our own skills or denigrate another part of the body, we hamper our abilities to complete the mission that God has given us. But when all parts are working together, we have a greater opportunity to collaborate our strengths for greater effectiveness in accomplishing the mission of taking the gospel to those who have not heard of Jesus Christ.

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