

SAFEGUARDING THE GOSPEL

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The church stands behind godly leadership (Acts 18:24-28).
2. The church contends for correct doctrine (Acts 19:1-7).
3. The church prevails through righteous living (Acts 19:18-20).

Background Passage: Acts 18–19

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

As its missionary efforts continued, the church sought to protect its doctrine and demonstrate the power of the gospel through righteous living so that others might trust in Christ.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When Paul arrived in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he encountered people with various understandings of salvation. Paul faithfully shared the gospel with all he met and persevered, resulting in many trusting in Jesus and experiencing changed lives. Paul's faithful perseverance testified to Jesus, who faithfully endured to bring salvation to the world.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because Christ endured suffering and death for our salvation, we persevere in sharing the gospel with others while praying they will trust in Jesus and experience transformation.

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, ask: **What is something that you have that you keep safe and how do you do so?** (jewelry in a safe; money at the bank; kids with trackers on their phones; pets in a cage; insured art)

TRANSITION: The greatest treasure that we have is the good news of Jesus Christ. By belonging to Him, we come to know Him and love Him. He is the greatest treasure of all. As a result, we want to ensure that we encourage godly leaders to know the Word of God and follow it. We want to ensure that our beliefs are consistent with Scripture and do not distort the gospel. We want to live in ways that show that we value the gospel above any earthly treasure.

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

- As the early church continued to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, they encountered various challenges. News of the Jerusalem Council was only one part of the message that needed to be heard; some disciples had not yet heard all of the information and did not understand how God's redeeming work came about. As a result, the church had to encourage godly leaders in the full understanding of the gospel, correct those who were in ignorance and error, and promote godly living.



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POINT 1

THE CHURCH STANDS BEHIND GODLY LEADERSHIP (ACTS 18:24-28).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 18:24-28** from his or her Bible.

24 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. **25** He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. **26** He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. **27** And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, **28** for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

GUIDE: Ask the group to look through **verses 24-25** and summarize the positive characteristics of Apollos (a Jew; eloquent; competent; was instructed well; fervent in spirit; speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus for the most part). Then summarize the one concerning aspect that is mentioned about him in these verses (only knew about John's baptism).

EXPLAIN: Use **verses 24-25** to explain the following (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 38):

Apollos was a faithful and bold witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ, but he needed greater clarity.

- We are introduced to Apollos for the first time. He is described as a Jew from Alexandria, an Egyptian city. He was competent in the Scriptures, suggesting he had received some formal training and was well-versed in his understanding of the Old Testament. Verse 25 said he had been taught about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, Israel's long awaited Messiah. However, one deficiency arose: he only knew of John's baptism. He was either unaware or had not incorporated the profound work of the Holy Spirit from the day of Pentecost.
- When Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos's teaching, they recognized something was missing. He needed clarification on the relationship of the baptism of repentance with the ministry of Jesus Christ.

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

A married couple who were from Italy but moved to Corinth. Paul worked with them as tentmakers (Acts 18:2-3). They went with Paul to Ephesus to be of help to the ministry (vv. 18-19).

ASK: (DDG p. 38)

How should we distinguish between false teaching and ignorance?

(someone may have accurate theology on essential truths of Scripture, and we should be slow to suggest that someone is a false teacher if they have not put all of the parts of God's redemptive plan together; sometimes people have not fully thought through implications of what they teach; when there is a humility and openness to continue to learn, we should be slow to judge and patient to instruct; however, when someone is persistently hostile or closed to correction and continues to entrench themselves in partial truths or neglects aspects of Scripture, we should be watchful of their teaching)

HIGHLIGHT: From **verses 26-28**, highlight the following idea (DDG p. 38):

With gentle instruction from other believers, Apollos became more effective in his teaching and witness for Christ.

- Instead of openly correcting or challenging Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila pulled him aside. In a spirit of gentleness and humility, Apollos was shown the way of the Lord more accurately, explaining specifically baptism and the recent events of the Holy Spirit.
- Apollos desired to go to Achaia. In preparation for his departure, believers wrote a letter to recommend that the disciples welcome him, indicating that he should be treated favorably and maybe suggesting that they support his ministry.
- Upon his arrival in Achaia, Luke said that Apollos was of great assistance to believers. These new converts in Achaia had remained faithful despite hardships and hostilities. Further, Apollos may have been a source of that strengthening grace to help the believers of Achaia grow.
- Apollos was able to vigorously refute the Jews in public. In his discussions about the claims of Jesus, by refuting their arguments in public, Apollos gave ample reason to believe that Jesus is the Messiah that Israel had been waiting for.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 38)

How can we grow in our effectiveness in proclaiming Christ?

(welcoming feedback will ensure that we grow in our knowledge of the gospel; growing in our understanding of doctrine; affirming others who are skilled and supporting their ministry)

TRANSITION: While affirming godly leaders, we must maintain correct doctrine and the integrity of the gospel in order for the mission of the church to go forward.

POINT 2

THE CHURCH CONTENDS FOR CORRECT DOCTRINE (ACTS 19:1-7).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 19:1-7** from his or her Bible.

1 And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. **2** And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” **3** And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” **4** And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” **5** On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **6** And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. **7** There were about twelve men in all.

CHALLENGE: On the board, in two columns, write “John’s Baptism” and “Christ’s Baptism.” Ask your group, “What are some differences and characteristics of these two baptisms?” (both water; both for repentance; John’s: repentance so people can believe in the One to come, Jesus; Jesus’s: repentance is in the name of the Lord Jesus and comes with the coming of the Holy Spirit)

EXPLAIN: Use **verses 1-3** to explain the following (DDG p. 38):

Though we encounter believers around us, we discern their spiritual maturity by asking questions and desiring that they know truth.

- After Apollos’s departure from Ephesus, Paul arrived and found some disciples there. We don’t know how these disciples became followers of Christ, but what is clear from their answers to Paul’s questions is that they had a deficient view of Christ, the Holy Spirit, of baptism, and the Christian life.
- By asking them if they had received the Spirit, Paul was trying to discern if they had been genuinely converted. He doubted since they had not been indwelt with the Spirit of God. They had never heard of the Holy Spirit. They had received only John’s baptism. While they knew of the teaching of John the Baptist, Paul goes on to explain that John was pointing to Jesus.
- Because of his love and care for these disciples and for truth, Paul took the time to teach them and baptize them.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Scripture is the Word of God that has completely entered into the world. . . . To the degree that humankind becomes larger, life becomes shorter, the memory weaker, science more extensive, error more serious, and deception more brazen, the necessity of Holy Scripture increases.”¹

—Herman Bavinck
(1854–1921)

ASK: (DDG p. 38)

What methods can we use to help people discern their spiritual state? (ask good questions that help people express what they believe in a way that allows them to open up; probe and listen more before we arrive at conclusions so that we act with much patience and care for people's souls; discern what they believe before helping them understand the truth and correcting any deficient theology)

HIGHLIGHT: Using **verses 4-7**, highlight the following idea. (DDG p. 38):

In truth and love, we correct doctrine when needed and build up the body for further ministry.

- Upon hearing this news, these people were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and they received the Holy Spirit, giving evidence that they were now truly followers of Jesus Christ.
- The signs of the Spirit—speaking in foreign languages and prophecy—confirmed that they belonged to the Lord. Twelve men were saved.
- Because they were speaking in tongues and prophesying, we can assume that they were being prepared to further testify about Christ and grow the church.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 38)

What can you do to be a part of building up the body for further ministry? (volunteering with kids or youth; mentoring others; discipling others; leading a Bible study or book group; growing in my personal study so I can help others)

TRANSITION: By rightly understanding the Word of God and its teachings, the church was able to encourage lifestyles that showed godliness and holiness.

POINT 3

THE CHURCH PREVAILS THROUGH RIGHTEOUS LIVING (ACTS 19:18-20).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 19:18-20** from his or her Bible.

18 Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. **19** And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. **20** So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

EXPLAIN: Imagine what Ephesus was like as a city, embedded in sorcery and magic arts. Point out in **verses 18-19** how the believers confessed their sins, destroyed their former ways of evil and sorcery and scrolls, and did so publicly at great cost to themselves. Remind the group that following Christ is of greater value than all the treasures of this world (DDG p. 38):

When we understand that all sources of wisdom or help books are inferior to Scripture, the Word of God can continue to spread.

- As Paul continued his ministry in Ephesus, he had healed sicknesses and cast out evil spirits (vv. 11-17). Ephesus was a community that was enamored with magic, the occult, and sorcery. These practices were in complete opposition to God's expressed will. Throughout the Old Testament, God had condemned the practices of the occult (see Deut. 18:9-12; 2 Kings 17:16-17; Isa. 44:24-26). These practices were not only forbidden for Jews, but also for Christians who trust in God alone.
- When Paul had come to Ephesus, many people believed. The result was that they turned from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Luke says that many were afraid (Acts 19:17) because they had seen Satan's power defeated through Paul's casting out of evil spirits. This fear was more than likely a fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7) and resulted in many confessing their sins publicly, repudiating their practices, and bringing out their scrolls of magic and sorcery out to be destroyed.
- When these former sorcerers became believers, they cleaned house. Literally. They could have quietly quit their practices and disposed of their crystals, oils, and scrolls, but they wanted everyone to know that following Jesus was better than anything else. For the Ephesian Christians, what was clear was that it was either Jesus or sorcery, and they showed it publicly. This was at great cost, as Luke says that the value was approximately fifty thousand silver pieces.
- Through these believers' actions, God approved and blessed their obedience and the word of God continued to become more prominent and accepted.

50,000 PIECES OF SILVER

Each piece of silver was a day's wages. Multiply that by 50,000.

ASK: Though other books in our society may be helpful in various ways, ask (DDG p. 39):

What other types of wisdom do people turn to today that are inferior to Scripture? (self-help books; even some “Christian” books; psychology books; new age books; books of other religions)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine below (DDG p. 39):

Key Doctrine #8: Preservation of Scripture: God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture, having inspired it and directed it to be free from error. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations. Our belief in the preservation of Scripture is supported by investigation into how the canon of Scripture was formed and how manuscripts were faithfully transmitted throughout the centuries.

HIGHLIGHT: Use **verse 20** and the points below to highlight the key doctrine:

- In verse 20, “the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.” And Scripture continues to spread and prevail because it has been preserved over generations through scribes as God’s inspired Word, useful for teaching, rebuking, and equipping (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- We can trust in the canonicity and transmission of the Bible with the various manuscripts collected over time.
- The books of “magic” were like rubbish, literally ashes and dust, to the new believers as they realized the weightiness and truth of God’s Word.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 39)

From Day 5 in the DDG: **In what ways have you experienced the power of God’s Word in your life?** (leave room for people to give specific examples of how Scripture has encouraged them or rebuked them or shown them truth about God and His character; have an answer of your own ready as well)

TRANSITION: As the church walked by faith in Christ and obedience to His commands, they showed the world that His value and worth is greater than anything this world could offer.

MY RESPONSE

SAY: When Paul arrived in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he encountered people with various understandings of salvation. Paul faithfully shared the gospel with all he met and persevered, resulting in many trusting in Jesus and experiencing changed lives. Paul's faithful perseverance testified to Jesus, who faithfully endured to bring salvation to the world. Because Christ endured suffering and death for our salvation, we persevere in sharing the gospel with others while praying they will trust in Jesus and experience transformation.

HEAD:

When we encounter people who are confused about the gospel, we need to be patient and ask good questions of them to discern how we can help or correct them. The gospel is powerful to change lives, and it continues to change a life, long after we initially believe.

How can you grow in asking good questions of people to encourage discussions about Christ?

HEART:

Because the gospel is the power of God for the salvation for everyone who believes, we want to have eyes that are quick to see the evidences of God's grace that changes a life. We will continue to be changed and grow in our understanding of what God has done for us in Jesus, and we can rejoice that God never gives up on us.

What changes have you seen in your life that cause you to hope in God's power to change you?

HANDS:

As we see people wrestling with the truths of Scripture, we ought to encourage them through prayer, words of affirmation, and support. Taking time to bless someone with life-giving words, we can rejoice with them in the transforming work that God does by His Spirit.

Who is someone who has grown in faith that you can encourage?

PRAY: Our Father in heaven, You are our all-powerful God. You have destroyed the works of the devil by Your Son's death and resurrection and have given us the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. Help us pursue truth through Your Word so that we might live for You. We ask this in the mighty name of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"This voluntary confession was evidence of repentance and fear. No one who is not deeply moved will lay himself open to people's reproaches and will accept judgment on earth in order to be acquitted in heaven."²

—J. I. Packer (1926–2020)

POINT 1: THE CHURCH STANDS BEHIND GODLY LEADERSHIP (ACTS 18:24-28).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“Aquila and Priscilla—evidently Priscilla in particular—are theologically competent believers who are capable to detect defective teaching and who are competent to correct it (18:26). They know the content of the gospel, they care about the accuracy and integrity of the gospel, and they are willing to speak up when they detect deficiencies in preachers. They make sure that the message of Jesus is preached and practiced according to the teaching and practice of the apostles. Thus they insist that correct information about Jesus is insufficient if potential converts are not instructed about the association of immersion in water (baptism) with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The fact that Luke mentions Priscilla before Aquila underlines the integral role of women in the proclamation of the word of God.”³

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

James Montgomery Boice recounts the situation of Hugh Latimer, a priest in the 16th century, as an example of someone who was converted but needed more instruction. Thomas Bilney, a monk was not thought of very much. But Bilney was converted, and he wondered how it might be possible for him to bring the gospel to Hugh Latimer. Bilney thought that Latimer would be a tremendous force for the Reformation in England if he could just hear the gospel. So Bilney prayed about this and finally hit upon an idea.

Priests were required to hear those who wanted to confess their sins. So one day when Latimer was serving in the church, Bilney went up to him, tugged at his sleeve, and asked Latimer to hear his confession. Latimer said he would. So they went into the confessional, and Bilney confessed the gospel to him. He told how he was a sinner, how he was unable to save himself by his own good works, how Jesus had died for him, and how now, by faith, the righteousness of Jesus had been imputed to him apart from good works. That is what he confessed to Hugh Latimer, and in that way Latimer heard the gospel with greater clarity and would become a leading figure in the Reformation in England.⁴

EXTRA

POINT 2: THE CHURCH CONTENDS FOR CORRECT DOCTRINE (ACTS 19:1-7).

+ COMMENTARY

“Did the apostle Paul have a rock concert or something of that nature? Obviously, he did nothing of the sort. Paul had one method only, and that was to teach the Word of God. And he really did it. He did it everywhere. In every town he went to, he went into the synagogues and taught from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. He taught that this one, who had come in his own lifetime, who had lived, taught, died, and then been raised from the dead, this Jesus of Nazareth, was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. He took the Old Testament, showed what God had said his Messiah would do, and then told how Jesus had done it.”⁵

+ ILLUSTRATION

Children find ways to take any object and turn it into a toy. A toilet paper roll can become a weapon or a spyglass; a paper plate can become a flying disc or a UFO. Sticks become baseball bats, and hats become ball gloves. While not their original intended purpose, they become functional albeit unusual toys.

For many people the Scriptures can function in a similar way. Instead of understanding them with their original design and message, ideas can be imported into the Bible so that its message says something it does not say or completely contradicts what it clearly says. While it may be helpful initially, when we do not use the Scriptures as God has revealed them, we risk distorting the gospel and perverting the message of His free grace.

God has given us His Word, and He has given us those who have understood it. Scripture has been preserved for us so that we might grow up and be wise in salvation, knowing that we are brought into the faith by the gospel and we are kept by the gospel and His power.

+ ILLUSTRATION

Many businesses install water detection sensors in strategic locations throughout their facilities to prevent water leakage. At the moment water pressure changes or leaks, a remote notification goes off so that the damage can be kept to a minimum and the water shut off.

Being theologically astute is like a remote water detection sensor. Noticing errors, being able to catch it swiftly, and having an ability to act wisely can prevent disasters from happening. Priscilla and Aquila were able to detect that something was slightly off with Apollos’s teaching and alert him almost right away. By pulling him aside, they were able to prevent the gospel from becoming diluted and confused.

Every Christian should be growing in biblical knowledge and theological discernment. We don’t have to know all of the labels and categories, but being able to sense that something is off will help safeguard the church from the disasters that happen when the truth of the gospel is confused or compromised.

POINT 3: THE CHURCH PREVAILS THROUGH RIGHTEOUS LIVING (ACTS 19:18-20).

+ COMMENTARY

“There was a public expression of repentance on the part of many of those who believed, whereby a number who had practiced sorcery (ta perierga, ‘superfluous works’, a technical term for magic) brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. Apparently they were moved by the exposure and overcoming of the exorcists to realize that their own previous involvement with the magic arts now needed to be acknowledged. Perhaps they had kept scrolls in which spells were written as an insurance policy, in case their newfound faith proved to be inadequate in some situation! Burning the scrolls was a way of repudiating what they contained and represented a greater trust in God to deliver them from trouble and supply their needs.”⁶

+ OPTIONAL DISCUSSION

The gospel has profound cultural influence. Paul’s ministry impacts society at large. By proclaiming the gospel, people turn from their practices of the occult, resulting in a threat to the commercial interests of local acts of the occult, including protests by the silversmiths who are concerned about a loss of business. While not attempting to overthrow businesses, the gospel brings about enormous challenges to those whose business practices are aligned with idolatry and the occult. Paul is not targeting silversmiths or local businesses. Persecution results from those who oppose the implications of the gospel because the message of Christ disrupts the stability of the world. What caused the great reaction in Ephesus was not the gospel alone, but the transformation it brought to the culture.

As Christians, we do not have to oppose businesses that support works of darkness as our first act of mission. Instead, believers who are radically transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ will bring about cultural changes that cause people to take notice. By living righteous lives, Christians can and often cause others to feel threatened by the gospel. Their reactions may be sympathetic to Christ, but they may be provoked to anger and hostility, feeling that their livelihoods are threatened or that their social standing may be jeopardized. As a result, we should not expect that our righteous lives will be received by everyone with great enthusiasm. But because Christ is greater still, we can believe that we have a reward laid up for us in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21).

References

1. Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2003), 472.
2. J. I. Packer, “Introduction,” in *Acts*, ed. Alister McGrath, *Crossway Classic Commentaries* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995), Ac 19:18.
3. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Expanded Digital Edition., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 814.
4. James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 316.
5. Boice, 323.
6. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 540.