When you hear the word evangelism, what comes to mind? For many people, the first image in their head is of Billy Graham, preaching at his crusades. When Billy Graham died earlier this year he was recognized as one of the most significant religious figures of the 20th century.

He preached in person to over 100 million people, and nearly 3 million people responded to his invitations at the end of his sermons. He is known as ‘America’s Preacher’, and he holds the honor of preaching the Gospel to more people than anyone else in history.

When I think of evangelism, that’s what I think of. Even as a preacher that’s pretty overwhelming. Nearly every spiritual gifts survey I have ever taken has listed evangelism as one of my lowest spiritual gifts. I think evangelism is pretty intimidating for most people.

When it comes to reaching people for Jesus, most of us don’t know where to start. We don’t know what to say, how to respond to people, or how to lead them toward Jesus. Paul serves as a great example of how we should go about taking the Gospel to the world around us.

**Acts 17:1–4 ESV — 1** Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. **2** And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” **4** And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

When Paul and Silas got to Thessalonica, they did the same thing they always did when they entered a new city. They went to the Synagogue and presented the Gospel to the Jews in the city first. The key here is not just where Paul went, but what he did when he got there. Luke tells us that for three weeks, three Sabbath days, Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, and he explained and proved that the Christ, the Messiah, had to suffer and rise from the dead.

The word Luke uses for ‘reasoned’ here is διαλέγομαι (dialegomai) which can mean to instruct or inform, but it also means to have a conversation, to discuss, to dialogue with someone else. Paul wasn’t just preaching and lecturing from the pulpit, he was having a conversation with these people. He was helping them understand, letting them ask questions and bring up concerns that he could help them deal with.

Paul also explained Scripture to them. That’s the word διανοίγω (dianoigo) which doesn’t just mean to explain, but to open, or interpret. This is the same word that Luke uses in Luke 24 when he tells of the story of Jesus meeting disciples on the Road to Emmaus. **Luke 24:32 ESV — 32** They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he **opened** to us the Scriptures?” That’s this same word that is translated explained here in Acts 17. The word proving means that Paul demonstrated it to them, or showed it to be true.

Paul did these things for three weeks in a row so that the Jewish people of Thessalonica would know the truth. He wanted them to come to know the true Messiah, so he was patient with them. He answered their questions, he talked through their concerns, and he showed them why what he said was the truth by using Scripture.

Paul’s example here is one that we should try to emulate in our own lives. This kind of dialogue that Paul had with the Jews in Thessalonica is not the kind where everyone gets to share what they believe no one challenges the others to change their minds. People today are fine hearing you talk about what you believe up until the moment that you try to tell them they need something else in their lives, or tell them they are wrong about something. But that’s exactly what Paul did.

He entered into a dialogue with people, he heard their point of view, and he gave his. But he didn’t leave it there. He spent three weeks convincing people that what they believed was not enough. They needed the salvation and grace that only Jesus could give them. Paul didn’t let them continue thinking they were okay as they were. They had to know the truth of the Gospel. So do the people you and I talk to every day.

One of the speakers at the North American last week made a point that I think is so key in how we reach people. He told us to make sure that we lead with grace, land with truth. So many people try to lead with truth, and leave it there. That ends up in legalism that won’t save anyone. I knew a kid in High School that used to wear a shirt that said Liars Go to Hell, and he was pretty proud of it. That’s leading with truth and leaving out the grace.

Sometimes it’s tempting to lead with grace, and leave out the truth. Then you get universalism, where everybody is okay, and a good God would never send people he loves to hell. Leave out the truth, and people will perish without Jesus. We need a balance. We need to lead with grace, and land with truth. That’s what Paul did in Thessalonica.

As a result, Luke says some Jews, many devout Greeks, and not a few leading or prominent women joined in with them. We tend to think of biblical times as a period in history where women were looked down on and seen as the property of their husbands, and that was true in many cases. But we often see women play a big role in God’s plans. They play a big role in spreading the Gospel and helping the church succeed. We’ll see this again later today, and in Acts 18 as well.

Once again, the Jews in the city were jealous. Luke tells us that some wicked men of the rabble formed a mob. That word rabble means people who were unemployed and just loafed around aimlessly in the marketplace. These were people who weren’t making any contribution to society, and were just out to cause trouble. They were seen as worthless people in Greek and Roman society.

These men attacked the house where Paul and Silas were staying, but they weren’t there. So they dragged the owner of the house, a man named Jason, before the authorities. They accused him of hosting Paul and Silas, who, in their words, were turning the world upside down, and worst of all, declaring that there was a King other than Caesar, this Jesus they kept talking about.

**Acts 17:8 ESV —8** And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things.

The reason they were so disturbed by this news was because they were afraid of what might happen if the Romans thought a rebellion was happening in Thessalonica. The Romans prided themselves on maintaining the Pax Romana, which is Latin for Roman Peace. But the way they made that happen was with one of the most fearsome armies in history.

If there was even a hint of rebellion against Caesar within a Roman province or city, the Roman army would come and put it down with force. That was part of the reason the Jewish leaders were so afraid when Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem and people were waving palm branches and shouting Hosanna. Things like that had happened before, especially around Passover, and it always ended in a massacre.

When the authorities in Thessalonica heard that Paul and Silas were proclaiming a king other than Caesar, they were scared. The rest of the Christians in Thessalonica immediately saw the threat to Paul and Silas, so they sent them away.

**Acts 17:10 ESV — 10** The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.

They were sent to Berea and Paul again went into the Jewish synagogue. Paul was nothing if not consistent. Paul and Silas got a very different reaction in Berea than they had gotten in other cities.

**Acts 17:11–12 ESV — 11** Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. **12** Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

The Jews that had attacked Paul were standing on tradition as the foundation of their faith

This is what we’ve always known, this is how we’ve always done it, so this is how it has to be.

Tradition can be a great thing. It can help us to remember things that are important to us, keep us grounded.

God often gave the Israelites traditions that he wanted them to continue to do to remember what he had done for them. He gave them Passover to remember that he had saved them from slavery in Egypt and the Festival of Tabernacles to remember the time they spend wandering in the wilderness. But tradition becomes harmful when we allow it to become normative. When we allow tradition to become the authority over everything else

Back in Acts 7, when Stephen became the first martyr of the church, the Jews main complaint against him was that he wanted to change the traditions that Moses had handed down to them. They made their traditions more important than their faith in God, more important than finding out what Scripture really said about the things Stephen was saying, and certainly more important than treating others with love.

All the Jews who attacked Paul and his colleagues as he traveled preaching the Gospel were doing the same thing. They were making their tradition of religion more important than anything else. They stood on tradition as their foundation rather than Scripture. Their traditions were more important to them than figuring out if their Messiah had really come.

But these Jews in Berea were more noble than that. The word Luke uses here means the Bereans had a high level of character, they were open-minded, and they were willing to learn.

Luke makes it clear that their nobility was due to their response to the Gospel. They were willing to accept and hear what Paul had to say about Jesus, and that spoke volumes about their character. They were teachable. They were following God the best they could with what they knew, but they never thought there was nothing else they could learn. They were always open to new things that God could teach them, even if it came from people they didn’t expect. Being teachable is one of the most important things we can do as disciples of Jesus. If we aren’t, we will stifle what God is trying to do in us and through us.

The Bereans were willing to set aside their traditions if they knew that God was doing something different through this Gospel that Paul was preaching. The foundation of their faith was not built on mere tradition, it was built on the Word of God. That’s where they went to find out if what Paul and Silas were saying was actually true.

This is the perfect example of what we should be doing ourselves to make sure that what we hear is true. When we hear something that we aren’t sure of, when we don’t know about something, we cannot just shrug our shoulders and move on.

When we don’t understand, or we don’t know an answer, we need to do exactly what the Bereans did when they first heard the Gospel. They examined the Scriptures daily to see if it was the truth. They didn’t dismiss it out of hand because it was different. They went to the absolute truth of God’s Word to make sure that this new Gospel they were hearing lined up with what Scripture said.

The word examined here means to study thoroughly, to investigate, to consider in detail. The Bereans did that on a daily basis until they found the answer to their question. They did that until they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus really was the Messiah. The Bereans were won to the Gospel of Jesus because they studied Scripture for themselves, and determined it to be true.

Just like in Thessalonica, we see that many believed, and again Luke points out that many of them were women of high standing in the community in Berea. That means these women were studying Scripture alongside the men in Berea. What a neat picture of what the church should look like.

Good things were happening in Berea, but the Jews from Thessalonica heard that Paul was in Berea preaching the Gospel there as well, so they came to cause even more trouble for him there. The Christians in Berea immediately sent Paul away by himself to avoid the trouble, and he ended up in Athens. So Paul was in Athens by himself, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him when they could, and we read this:

**Acts 17:16 ESV — 16** Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Paul was provoked by what he saw in the city of Athens. The Holy Spirit stirred him up, urged him on, incited him to act because of the idolatry he saw there. Paul’s provocation was a righteous anger. Paul’s reaction here shows us that idolatry should be something we take seriously as well. Paul didn’t just see their idolatry and give up on them. He didn’t hold up signs in protest about how they were going to hell if they didn’t honor the true God. He didn’t write a scathing Facebook post about how disgusted he was to see people worshiping idols all around him.

Paul saw their idolatry, and he was moved by it. He was urged to act, and he tried to reach them with the Gospel. When Paul looked at these people, he didn’t see them as his enemies, all he saw were people who did not know Jesus. People who he knew would suffer an eternity without God if they did not get to know Jesus, and he did something about it.

That’s what Paul did for these people in Athens. He started off in the synagogues, and was quickly invited to the Areopagus. The Areopagus was the council that ruled Athens. Paul took that invitation as an opportunity to share the Gospel with some of the most prestigious and powerful people in that city.

**Acts 17:22–31 ESV — 22** So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, **25** nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. **26** And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, **27** that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, **28** for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ **29** Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. **30** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

This sounds very different from the other times we’ve seen Paul present the Gospel. The difference here was Paul’s audience. The men of the Areopagus had not grown up in the Jewish faith, and they had no foundation to build upon like so many of the people Paul had spoken to before. Paul had to meet these people where they were at before they could even begin to understand the Gospel, and that’s exactly what he did.

Paul took what these people already knew, and used it to guide them to the saving message of the Gospel. He used their own culture, their own literature, and even their worship of an ‘unknown god’ to proclaim the Gospel to them. He met them where they were at, and guided them to Jesus from there.

These people were about as far away from Paul’s religious and political views as you could possibly get, both as a Jewish man and a Christian. But Paul did whatever he could to reach them with the saving message of Jesus Christ. Paul writes this in:

**1 Corinthians 9:22–23 ESV —22** …I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. **23** I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

This was Paul’s mission strategy. It didn’t mean that he abandoned his convictions, it didn’t mean that he went soft on the Gospel message because it might make people uncomfortable. It meant that he got to know the people he was speaking to, and he did whatever he needed to do to make sure they heard about Jesus. One of the speakers at the North American said it well, “We should do everything short of sin to make sure people hear about Jesus.”

So how do we do that? How do we do what Paul did, and meet people where they’re at to make sure they can hear about Jesus? We committed to making this year at Agape Christian Church a year of external focus. How do we reach outside these walls to the people around us, to the people in our community? That’s why we chose to preach through the book of Acts. We wanted to see clearly how the Holy Spirit moved the early church to be externally focused in a way that changed the world.

Once we get done looking at the book of Acts, we are going to start a series we’re calling Reckless Love that is all about exactly how we do this. Once we’ve seen how they did this in the Book of Acts with the help of the Holy Spirit, how do we do it right now, today, in La Porte, Indiana? We’re going to get practical about how we show love to the people around us, and how we meet people where they’re at so we can reach them with the Gospel.

For today, allow me to give you three things that we have to do if we want to be able to reach people for Jesus.

1. Know what you believe.

If you take a look at everything Paul did, it is obvious that Paul knew his own beliefs well. He knew what he believed and why. Most importantly, he could tell you why he believed it by using Scripture. Now Paul was educated as a Pharisee, so that might seem like an unfair comparison. But Silas wasn’t. Timothy wasn’t. Luke wasn’t. They all joined Paul on this missionary journey, and none of them had Paul’s education.

Knowing your own faith well doesn’t mean you have to have a degree from a Bible college. It means you have to be committed to knowing the Bible. You need to study the Bible and not just read it. You need to know how to interpret Scripture so that you know when you hear something that doesn’t line up with what the Bible says.

**1 Peter 3:15 ESV — 15** but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

When people ask questions about our faith, we need to be able to give them an answer. I had a very eclectic group of friends in High School, and we would often talk about what we believed and how it was different from what everyone else believed. There were two guys in our group of friends that were Catholic, and whenever we would talk about what we believed, they just kind of went along with what everybody else said. On several occasions, we would ask them pointed questions, “What exactly do you believe about what we’re talking about?” They never had an answer to give. Now don’t hear me wrong, that’s not the case for all Catholics, but these two particular guys could not give an answer for their faith. They didn’t know what they believed or why, or at least couldn’t articulate it well.

When we don’t have an answer to give people about our faith, what do they think about our faith? Do they think that we just don’t know much, or that our faith really isn’t that important to us? If it’s not important enough for us to be able to articulate it well, why would an unbeliever find it important enough to change their whole life?

1. Know what they believe.

Paul knew his audience in Athens. Paul knew who these people were, he knew what they believed, and he was even familiar enough with the writings of their philosophers to be able to quote them. How many of us can quote the Bible accurately, much less the writings of other beliefs and cultures?

My best example of this was my dad. He worked with a man that was a Mormon, and he talked to him regularly about what he believed. What nobody outside of our house saw was the massive book on Mormonism that my dad bought and kept by his chair in the living room. Any time he had a free moment, he was reading about what his coworker believed so that he would know how to talk to him about Jesus.

Getting to know what other people believe is not always comfortable, and it’s not always easy. But when we care enough to get to know people and what they really think, what they really believe, then they might just care enough to find out why we want them to know about Jesus.

1. Change your perspective on people

I had a professor once who challenged us to think about the way that God looks at people. God doesn’t see us as black or white, blue collar or white collar, conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat. God sees each and every human being as a person made in the image of God, and loved deeply by him. We were worth enough to God that he sent his son to die for every one of us. I am convinced the only difference God cares about is whether a person knows Jesus as their Lord and Savior, or is still lost in their sin.

What do we see when we see people? Is our reaction to them colored by what we see? Do we make judgments about them based on the kind of clothes they wear, the kind of music they listen to, the person they voted for, their tattoos and piercings, the color of their skin? What would happen if we put all those differences aside and just looked at them as people who are created in the image of God, loved deeply by him, and worth every effort to help them get to know Jesus Christ?

When we do that, when we see them as God sees them, and see their need for the grace of Jesus, then maybe we’ll be ready to get out of our comfort zones. Maybe we’ll be ready to become all things to all people, that by all means we might save some. Maybe we’ll be ready to do anything short of sin to save people who will perish without Jesus. And then we can take the message of Jesus Christ to the world who desperately needs to know him.