GARDEN

Relational Evangelism Study

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

Week 3 - You Don't Have to Know the Answer
Honesty, Follow-Up, and Becoming Prepared

BIG IDEA

Not knowing an answer does not disqualify you from evangelism. Honest uncertainty can become the beginning of deeper conversation and deliberate preparation - if you actually return.

Leader Preparation

Purpose of Week 3

Week 3 removes a major barrier to evangelism: the fear of being asked something the Christian cannot answer. Participants learn that honest uncertainty is legitimate, but it must lead toward clarification, research, and follow-up rather than permanent ignorance.

The Stage Three Project advances to an honest **knowledge inventory**: What can I explain now? Where do I get stuck? What specifically do I need to learn?

Before the Meeting

Read **Acts 17:16-34**. Review your own Stage Three issue and identify at least one place where your knowledge is weaker than you would like. Be prepared to model intellectual humility.

Your Role

Create a group culture where "I don't know" is safe but growth is expected. Protect participants from embarrassment, especially if others know more about their topic. Redirect competitive apologetics toward careful understanding and faithful preparation.

> **The leader should model both sentences: "I don't know" and "I'll find out."**

Participant Study Begins

How to Use This Study

Read the material aloud together, switching readers at each section break. When you reach a **DISCUSS** section, pause and discuss the questions as a group. When you reach a **REFLECT** or **MY STAGE THREE PROJECT** section, take a few minutes to write individually before continuing. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture passages should also be read aloud together.

> **No one needs to teach the lesson. Work through it together.**

Scripture First

As you read **Acts 17:16-34**, listen for three things: **what Paul notices, what Paul understands about his audience, and what Paul is prepared to explain.**

Acts 17:16-34

DISCUSS

1. What had Paul observed about Athens before he spoke?

2. Where does Paul connect with ideas his audience already understands?

3. Where does he challenge their worldview?

4. What kinds of knowledge appear to be behind Paul's response?

5. What does this passage suggest about the relationship between paying attention to people and being prepared to speak?

> **LEADER NOTE - WHY ACTS 17?**
>
> Week 3 must hold two truths together: Christians do not need an instant answer to every question, and mature Christian witness should still grow in knowledge. Acts 17 gives us a picture of a believer who has paid attention to his audience and is prepared to speak meaningfully into their worldview. Do not make Paul's extraordinary ministry the minimum standard for a new believer; use it as a picture of thoughtful preparedness.

Preparedness Matters

Paul does not appear to be improvising from complete ignorance. He has observed Athens. He understands something about its religious culture. He can reason from Scripture and speak to ideas his hearers recognize.

That should challenge us.

Christian humility does not mean celebrating ignorance.

If someone asks why Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead, whether the Bible can be trusted, why God allows suffering, or whether morality can be objective without God, those are serious questions.

> **We should want to become Christians who can give thoughtful answers.**

But there is an important difference between saying **preparedness matters** and saying **you must already know the answer before you can engage anyone.**

If the second statement were true, many Christians would remain silent for years.

GARDEN takes another approach:

> **Start where you are - and keep growing.**

The Question You Were Afraid They Would Ask

Imagine you are talking with a friend about Christianity. The conversation is going well. Then your friend asks:

> **"If God is good and powerful, why does he allow children to suffer?"**

And you freeze.

You know Christians have written about the problem of evil. You may have heard sermons or arguments before. But right now, you cannot put together a responsible answer.

What do you do?

Many Christians feel only two options are available:

Option One: bluff your way through an answer.

Option Two: avoid spiritual conversations so this never happens.

There is a third option.

> **"That's a good question. I'm not sure I can give you a good answer right now. Let me think about it and get back to you."**

That is not the end of the conversation.

It can be the beginning of your preparation.

LEADER NOTE - NORMALIZE WITHOUT GLORIFYING IGNORANCE

Participants who fear difficult questions need genuine permission to say, "I don't know." But do not let the group turn that permission into a permanent strategy. The full pattern is **admit -> clarify -> research -> return**. Stage One is a legitimate starting point, not the destination.

Honesty Is Better Than Bluffing

Sometimes Christians feel pressure to defend God, Christianity, or the Bible immediately. That pressure can tempt us to say more than we actually know.

That can create several problems.

We may give a weak answer and present it as though it were the Christian answer. We may repeat something inaccurate. We may become defensive. We may lose credibility when the other person knows the issue better than we do.

There is no shame in distinguishing between **what Christianity teaches** and **what you personally know how to explain right now.**

> **Intellectual honesty is not weakness. It is part of credibility.**

DISCUSS

Why do Christians sometimes feel pressure to answer immediately?

What damage can a confident but bad answer do?

Could admitting that you don't know ever increase someone's respect for the conversation? Why?

What is the difference between humility and intellectual laziness?

Stage One - No Knowledge and No Comfort

Last week we introduced three stages of preparedness. Today we focus on the movement between them.

At **Stage One**, you may have little knowledge about a particular issue and little comfort discussing it.

Your goal is not to pretend otherwise.

A useful Stage One response is:

> **"That's a good question. I'm not sure how I'd answer that right now. Let me think about it and get back to you."**

You can also ask a clarifying question before you leave the issue:

> **"When you say the Bible has been changed, what do you mean?"**

That matters because you need to research the question the person is actually asking - not a different question that merely sounds similar.

Stage Two - Growing Comfort and Curiosity

As comfort grows, you begin to do more inside the conversation.

You ask questions such as:

> **"What do you mean by that?"**
> **"How did you come to that conclusion?"**
> **"Why do you think that's true?"**

You may still not know the answer. But now you can understand the claim, identify assumptions, and keep the conversation moving without bluffing.

Stage Three - Knowledge and Confidence Together

At Stage Three, you can combine thoughtful questions with substantive knowledge.

You can explain the Christian position in ordinary language. You can identify important assumptions. You can respond to major objections. You know where to send someone for deeper information.

And Stage Three does **not** mean you never say, "I don't know."

> **The more you learn, the more clearly you discover the limits of what you know.**

LEADER NOTE - STAGES ARE TOPIC-SPECIFIC

A person may be Stage Three on the resurrection and Stage One on textual criticism, Islam, sexuality, or cosmology. Avoid labeling participants globally as Stage One, Two, or Three Christians. The framework describes preparedness **on a particular issue**.

The Most Important Part: Get Back to Them

Suppose you say:

> **"Let me look into that and get back to you."**

Then three weeks pass. You never research it. You never mention it again.

The phrase that sounded humble has now become an escape hatch.

GARDEN asks us to do something different.

> **If you say you will return, return.**

You might come back the next day. Or a week later. The timing depends on the relationship and the question. But follow-up communicates something important:

I heard you. Your question mattered. I cared enough to think about it after our conversation.

That may communicate as much about your seriousness as the answer itself.

A Simple Four-Part Response

When you do not know the answer, remember four movements:

1. ADMIT

Be honest about the limit of your knowledge.

> **"I don't know enough about that to give you a good answer."**

2. CLARIFY

Make sure you understand what the person means.

> **"When you say science disproves God, what specifically do you have in mind?"**

3. RESEARCH

Later, investigate the actual claim. Look for the strongest version of the objection and the strongest responsible Christian response.

4. RETURN

Reopen the conversation.

> **"I was thinking about what you said the other day..."**

This simple pattern turns a moment of ignorance into a path toward preparedness.

LEADER NOTE - THE RETURN IS A RELATIONAL ACT

Do not reduce follow-up to delivering information. Returning says, "I remembered you." It also gives the person room to correct your understanding: "Actually, that's not quite what I meant." That correction is useful.

What Good Research Is - and Is Not

Research does not mean searching until you find the first Christian answer that agrees with you.

Good research begins by understanding the objection fairly.

Ask:

What exactly is being claimed?
What is the strongest version of the argument?
What evidence or reasoning supports it?
How have thoughtful Christians responded?
What does Scripture actually require me to affirm?
Where is there legitimate disagreement among Christians?

The goal is not merely to collect ammunition.

> **The goal is to understand the issue well enough to represent both the objection and the Christian response fairly.**

That takes more work than finding a clever comeback.

It is also far more useful.

Trusted Voices, Not One Voice

No teacher, apologist, pastor, scholar, website, or AI tool should become your unquestioned authority.

Useful starting voices may include **William Lane Craig, Greg Koukl, John Lennox, J.P. Moreland, Daniel B. Wallace, Frank Turek**, and other responsible Christian scholars relevant to the topic.

But recommended does not mean infallible.

Compare sources. Check Scripture. Notice areas where Christians disagree. Learn enough to explain the issue in your own words.

> **Borrow expertise. Do not outsource your thinking.**

LEADER NOTE - AI AND RESEARCH

If AI comes up, frame it as an assistant rather than an authority. It can help identify arguments, vocabulary, opposing views, questions to investigate, and possible sources. Important claims should be checked against Scripture and credible primary or scholarly sources. Participants should not simply paste an objection into AI and repeat whatever comes back.

REFLECT - Your Current Knowledge

Return to the issue you identified last week. Without researching yet, take an honest inventory.

What do I already know about this issue?

What could I explain confidently in two minutes right now?

Where would I probably get stuck?

What terms, facts, Bible passages, arguments, or evidence do I recognize but not understand well enough to explain?

What am I currently assuming rather than actually knowing?

DISCUSS

What did this inventory reveal about the difference between recognizing an argument and being able to explain it?

Why is it useful to identify the exact place where your knowledge runs out?

Conversation in Practice

Imagine someone says:

> **"The Bible has been copied and translated so many times that we can't know what it originally said."**

You have heard Christians discuss manuscripts before, but you do not understand textual criticism well enough to explain it.

Possible Response A

> **"That's not true. Scholars have proven the Bible is accurate."**

Possible Response B

> **"I don't know anything about that."**

And the subject disappears.

Possible Response C

> **"I've heard that claim before, but I don't know enough about the manuscript evidence to give you a responsible answer. When you say it was changed, do you mean you think we don't know what the original authors wrote?"**

Now imagine they say:

> **"Yeah. Basically, every time it was translated somebody changed it a little."**

You have learned something important. The person may be imagining a chain of translations - like a centuries-long game of telephone.

Now you know what to investigate.

DISCUSS

What makes Response C stronger than bluffing?

What did the clarifying question reveal?

How might your research be different now that you understand the person's actual claim?

After researching, how could you naturally reopen this conversation?

> **LEADER NOTE - RESIST ANSWERING THE BIBLE EXAMPLE**
>
> The purpose of this exercise is the process, not a lesson on textual criticism. If someone knows the subject, fine, but do not let the group spend the remainder of Week 3 solving the example. The participant's own Stage Three topic is where substantive research will begin.

MY STAGE THREE PROJECT

Week 3 - Knowledge Inventory

Your project now has a person and a possible issue. This week, identify the boundary between what you know and what you need to learn.

My person: _____

My current issue:

In one or two sentences, what do I think the strongest version of this person's concern or claim is?

What can I already explain accurately?

Where exactly does my knowledge run out?

What are three things I need to learn?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What is one clarifying question I could ask my person before assuming I understand the issue?

Do not try to become Stage Three this week. Define the gap first. Good research begins with knowing what you need to learn.

> **LEADER NOTE - THIS INVENTORY DRIVES WEEK 5**
>
> Participants may be tempted to begin collecting links immediately. Encourage precision first. "Learn about the problem of evil" is too broad. Better gaps sound like: "I need to understand the logical vs. evidential problem," "I need to know what Christianity means by God's goodness," or "I need to understand why my friend thinks suffering makes God unlikely."

Discussion

1. What scares you most about being asked a question you cannot answer?

2. Why can saying "I don't know" be difficult for Christians?

3. When does humility become an excuse not to study?

4. What should a mature Christian reasonably be prepared to explain about the faith?

5. Is it possible to know many apologetic arguments and still be poor at evangelism? Why?

6. What makes a source trustworthy enough to influence how you answer someone?

7. Why is understanding the strongest version of an objection important?

8. How would your evangelism change if every difficult question became a research assignment rather than a reason to avoid conversation?

> **LEADER NOTE - QUESTION FOUR CAN GO DEEP**
>
> The course is not trying to create a fixed checklist of everything every mature Christian must know. Let the group wrestle with reasonable expectations: the gospel, core Christian doctrine, reasons for hope, Scripture, and growing ability to address recurring questions in one's actual relationships. The larger point is that maturity should normally produce increasing preparedness.

This Week in the GARDEN

This week, practice turning uncertainty into preparation.

LISTEN

If your person says something significant, listen long enough to understand the claim before trying to answer.

ADMIT

If you do not know, say so without embarrassment or defensiveness.

CLARIFY

Ask one question that helps you understand exactly what they mean.

INVENTORY

Complete your Stage Three knowledge inventory. Identify the specific gaps you need to fill.

RETURN

If you have previously told someone you would look into a question and never followed up, consider returning to it now.

PRAY

Ask God for humility to admit what you do not know, discipline to become better prepared, and courage to return to conversations you might otherwise avoid.

Pray Together

Pray for the people in your Stage Three Projects and for one another.

Ask God for **humility without passivity, confidence without arrogance, curiosity without fear, discipline to study, and opportunities to return to meaningful conversations.**

Before Week 4

Bring your Stage Three Project notes next week.

You should now have: **one person, one possible issue, an honest picture of what you already know, and a specific list of what you still need to understand.**

Next week we will focus on one of the most powerful skills in GARDEN:

> **Ask Better Questions.**

You will begin developing **3-5 thoughtful questions** that can clarify your person's view, uncover assumptions, test reasoning, and help a conversation move deeper - even before you have mastered the answer.

After the Meeting - Leader Reflection

Did participants experience relief at permission to admit uncertainty?

Did anyone interpret "I don't know" as permission not to prepare?

Were participants able to identify specific knowledge gaps rather than vague topics?

Did anyone's Stage Three issue change because they realized they had misunderstood the person's concern?

Who may need help finding trustworthy resources when research begins?

Did the group understand that preparedness is topic-specific and developmental?

Leader Preview - Week 4

Week 4 moves from **knowledge inventory** to **strategic questioning**. Each participant should develop 3-5 questions connected to the real Stage Three issue. The emphasis will include clarification, reasons, assumptions, contradictions, and burden of proof - while keeping questions conversational rather than turning them into an interrogation.