

WELCOMED BY THE GOSPEL



+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God accepts all people who believe the gospel (Acts 10:34-43).
2. The Spirit's presence unites people who believe the gospel (Acts 10:44-48).
3. The church celebrates when people believe the gospel (Acts 11:1-3,15-18).

Background Passage: Acts 10–11

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God confirmed that salvation had come to the Gentiles through the giving of the Holy Spirit, who unites all who believe.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Peter learned that God does not show favoritism but calls His people to proclaim the message of Jesus's death and resurrection to all people, to celebrate His work in their lives, and to welcome believers into His family, regardless of their ethnicity.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus, we are not to show favoritism as we share the gospel, but are to extend the call of salvation to all people with equal concern, urgency, and joy.

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: **Have you ever had a huge “ah-ha” moment? What was it regarding?** (wait for a volunteer to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion; examples may include tricks to use your smartphone better; Easter eggs in movies; how to travel more efficiently and cheaper; the truth of the gospel; how your spouse was the one you wanted to marry)

TRANSITION: Certain moments in life change everything. A light bulb goes off, and our realization forever illuminates our thoughts regarding that topic, relationship, or task. Sometimes, those “ah-ha” moments are over silly things. Other times, they are about serious matters. In today's session, we will take a peek at a pivotal moment for Peter. This divinely led moment was a vital one which would lead to a needed paradigm shift for the early church.

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

- God initiated a series of events in the lives of Peter (a Jewish Christian) and Cornelius (a Gentile, soon-to-be Christian) that would result in a colossal paradigm shift for the early church's mindset and conduct. Ten years after Christ's commission, the gospel spread throughout Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. But now it was time for the truth about Christ to reach the nations. The mystery of the gospel, as Paul liked to call it, needed uncovering. Namely, God's heart is for every tribe, tongue, and nation to hear the gospel message. The good news of Jesus is for all people.



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POINT 1

GOD ACCEPTS ALL PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THE GOSPEL (ACTS 10:34-43).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 10:34-43** from his or her Bible.

34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, **35** but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. **36** As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), **37** you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: **38** how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. **39** And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, **40** but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, **41** not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. **42** And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. **43** To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

EXPLAIN: Using **verses 34-35**, explain the following idea (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 82):

Peter shared to the Gentile crowd that God does not show favoritism but accepts all types of people who trust in Him.

- Peter’s Jewish culture and religious practices required him to be separate from Gentiles in order to worship God. Yet, worship includes obedience, and God clearly led Peter to this crossroad where the apostle had to consider the truth of God’s heart—that the gospel is for every people and nation.
- The paradigm shifted, and Peter rightly understood that God doesn’t show favoritism. Though the Jews had a special role to play in the unfolding of God’s salvation plan, they were not the only people to whom God desired to demonstrate His grace and mercy.
- Much of the Old Testament practices were about making sinful man acceptable to a holy God. Jewish life centered around obtaining and retaining ritual purity. Simply stepping into Cornelius’s house made Peter unclean in the eyes of the Jews. According to the old Mosaic laws, God’s people were to be set apart physically, ethnically, and spiritually in order for their sacrifices to be acceptable. Through the new covenant—ushered in by the sufficient sacrifice of Christ—God gives believers Christ’s righteousness and makes us acceptable to Him.



THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Scan this QR code for an explanation of the biblical concept “the fear of the Lord.”

ASK: (DDG p. 82)

From Day 1 in the DDG: **How ought the truth that God does not show favoritism shape the life of a Christian?** (God's people should reflect this truth and reject favoritism in any form; this includes partiality shown within race, age, sex, socioeconomic, and any other potential dividing lines)

DIG: Guide the group to underline any actions of God they notice as you read Acts 10:37-43 aloud to the group. Then look and circle words highlighting man's involvement in God's plan. Give them a few moments to do so, then ask them to share what they observed.

INSTRUCT: Pass out **PACK ITEM 10: PROPHETS WHO TESTIFIED**, pointing out how the prophets of the Old Testament testified to Jesus. Then discuss **verses 36-43** as it refers to the following (DDG p. 82):

Peter pointed to the truth of Jesus—His life, ministry, and death—that He is the One the prophets testified would bring forgiveness and salvation.

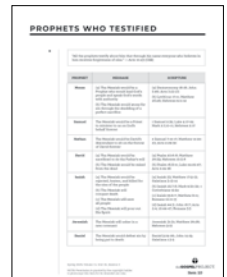
- God sent, proclaimed, anointed, raised, appointed, commanded, and more. He was and continues to be actively working to bring the good news of peace to all people—first to Israel, but ultimately to all nations.
- Peter pointed out that Jesus's ministry began in Galilee, and continued throughout the "country of the Jews and in Jerusalem." But then the people killed Him, yet God raised Him up. And God commanded His disciples to preach and testify that all who believe receive forgiveness of sin.
- Though God is the one ultimately at work, God works through humankind as well. He carries out His purpose-filled plan via the actions of people.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 82)

What can we learn about sharing the gospel from Peter's message?

(to share that God desires all people to come to Him, showing no favoritism; that Jesus brings good news of peace; that Jesus is Lord of all; that He was killed and God raised Him up; that Jesus is judge of the living and the dead; that everyone who believes in Him will be forgiven)

TRANSITION: As Peter proclaimed the intentional, divine work of salvation, God put His plan into motion once again through His people. The Holy Spirit was about to demonstrate His power and grace on those who heard Peter's message and received it by faith.



POINT 2

THE SPIRIT'S PRESENCE UNITES PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THE GOSPEL (ACTS 10:44-48).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 10:44-48** from his or her Bible.

44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. **45** And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. **46** For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, **47** "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" **48** And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

REVIEW: Invite a volunteer to read Acts 2:1-13,41 and another to read Acts 8:14-17. Reviewing these passages, ask, "Where do we see the Spirit descending on believers? (Jerusalem and Samaria)"

HIGHLIGHT: Discuss **verses 44-46** and highlight the following (DDG p. 82):

The Holy Spirit descended on the Gentile converts, displaying that God's gospel is for all people, from Jerusalem, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

- During His time on earth, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to empower His people. At the day of Pentecost, not long after Jesus ascended to heaven, God sent His Spirit to indwell the early church established by Christ (Acts 2:1-13). But this was just the beginning of the Spirit sealing His people. He later came to new believers in Samaria (8:14-17), and again here in Acts 10, to the Caesarean Gentiles.
- The circumcised Jewish believers were "amazed," not expecting the Holy Spirit to pour on the Gentiles. No one was expecting that, even though Jesus mentioned that the Spirit will fall on all believers.
- Again the speaking of tongues was a result of the descending of the Holy Spirit, like at Pentecost. Through a fruit-bearing pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the house of Cornelius, God confirmed His plan of salvation for non-Jews.
- Caesarea was a city within the region of Judea. There was a progressive and geographically concentric spreading of the message of Christ that followed the pattern set forth by Christ in Acts 1:8. The gospel had now made it from Jerusalem to both Judea and Samaria. Through His messengers, God was marching His gospel to the ends of the earth.
- Just as in the previous special pouring out of the Holy Spirit, there were undeniable demonstrations of spiritual fruit as a result of His presence.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Sent into the world to witness for our Master, may we ever be strangers there, ready to confess Him the true object of our soul's devotion."¹

—James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905)

ASK: (DDG p. 82)

What is evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit among God's people today? (church unity; fruit of the Spirit demonstrated in the life of a Christian; new believers; deeper commitment to the Lord and to His people)

EXPLAIN: Using **verses 47-48**, explain the following (DDG p. 82):

Baptism is not a prerequisite needed to gain salvation. Rather, it is a symbolic step for the saved.

- The early church demonstrated a pattern of immediately baptizing new converts. Not only was it a personal symbol of salvation for the individual, it was a sign of confirmation by and acceptance into the community of saints. The same is true today.
- Peter declared that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit "just as we have." This added more evidence to the paradigm shift needed for the church to embrace so that they might be in line with God's perfect plan for the gospel to be brought to the ends of the earth.
- Peter stayed with the Gentile believers after this incredible display of God's salvation. This provided more confirmation to the watching world that the barriers between Jews and Gentile were crumbling.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 82)

Why is baptism important for the believer? (it's a step of obedience; it follows Jesus's example; it's an outward expression of an inward faith; it identifies one to the community of believers)

TRANSITION: Convinced of God's good plan to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, Peter brought this transformative news back to the church in Jerusalem and fought for the full acceptance of the Gentiles into the fold.

POINT 3

THE CHURCH CELEBRATES WHEN PEOPLE BELIEVE THE GOSPEL (ACTS 11:1-3,15-18).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 11:1-3** from his or her Bible.

1 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. **2** So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, **3** “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

INTERACT: In groups of 3-4, ask the group to put themselves in the shoes of the early Jewish believers. Ask, “What might be modern examples of what it was like for Peter to eat with uncircumcised men?” (ministry leaders eating with prostitutes, drug addicts, or gang members; spending time in bars, casinos, or prisons for ministry purposes; debates over patterns of speech, dress, eating and drinking for those in the church; division over Bible translations; division over educational choices)

READ: Invite another volunteer to read aloud Peter’s response in **Acts 11:15-18**.

15 “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. **16** And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ **17** If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” **18** When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

HIGHLIGHT: Using **verses 1-3 and 15-18**, highlight the following (DDG p. 83):

If God allows the Spirit to come on anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ, the church must accept them into the family of God with celebration and glorify God, despite any external differences they might have.

- Now that the Messiah had come, God’s people had to embrace their newfound life in Christ. Christ fulfilled the old covenant and brought forth a new way of living for both Jews and Gentiles.
- As the Jews tried to sort out what worshiping God looked like under the new covenant, different camps of belief and practice emerged. Some held to the thought that all who follow Christ must also follow Jewish law and practices, including circumcision. This was the first recorded instance of what would continue to be a point of debate and contention in the early church.
- Under the old covenant, eating with Gentiles rendered Jews unclean as well. Thus, the criticism by the circumcision party toward Peter’s decision to eat with the Gentiles. Though their zeal for God’s law may

have been in the right place, this group of believers missed out on the opportunity to embrace and rejoice over the sinners who had been redeemed.

- Peter responded to his critics with a powerful testimony. He filled his story with details of the Spirit's actions alongside Jesus's words. This served to defend Peter's actions. It also pointed the early church to the One who was actively working to gift His lavish grace to all who would receive it—regardless of their ethnic identity.
- The same audience that critiqued Peter for religious missteps, now understood God's mission and praised Him for the salvation given to the Gentiles. This softening of hearts and opening of minds further demonstrates the acts of God, not only within the Gentiles who required forgiveness of sins, but also within the early church members who needed clarity and direction for the future.

ASK: (DDG p. 83)

How can I make an effort to share the gospel with those who are lost, even if they seem extremely different from my friends in the church? (inviting neighbors and coworkers to coffee; being intentional about listening to the Spirit's voice when it prompts me to share with a stranger; studying the Word and reading books to prepare me to have an encounter with someone ready to hear the gospel)

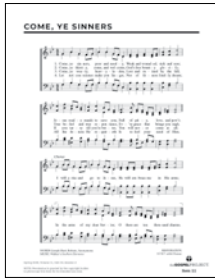
FOCUS: Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine in their DDG (p. 83).

Key Doctrine #67: Repentance: Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.

CHALLENGE: Ask everyone to take a few moments to consider what group of people he or she finds difficult to have compassion for. Suggest that members write down the following: "I glorify God that He gives repentance resulting in life even to . . ." and let them finish that sentence.

SHARE: It is good to reflect on our own conversion story as we think of the joy we could bring to others. Ask some to share the following (DDG p. 83):

How have I seen God move in my own story of repentance? (answers will vary; be prepared with your own story as a model)



MY RESPONSE

SAY: Peter learned that God does not show favoritism but calls His people to proclaim the message of Jesus’s death and resurrection to all people, to celebrate His work in their lives, and to welcome believers into His family, regardless of their ethnicity. Because we have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus, we are not to show favoritism as we share the gospel, but are to extend the call of salvation to all people with equal concern, urgency, and joy. Pass out **PACK ITEM 11: COME, YE SINNERS** and, noting that we were once sinners yet God still allows us to go to Him, sing the hymn together.

HEAD:

The gospel is for everyone. Regardless of upbringing, political leanings, skin color, or societal honor. God holds no favoritism, and neither should His people. In His goodness, God works to save all who will place their faith in Him. He also works to open the minds of God’s people so that their hearts can better align with His.

Why does God allow all people the opportunity to repent and come to faith in Him?

HEART:

God went to great lengths to save Cornelius and his household. This is representative of God’s love for all people. God desires for all to come to repentance and will accept anyone who asks for forgiveness and trusts in the sacrifice of Jesus. He died for you, your family, your neighbors, your co-workers, and even your greatest enemies. His heart is for all, and His people ought to reflect His heart.

Knowing God’s heart is for all, how does that make you want to glorify God?

HANDS:

Through baby steps of faith and obedience, Peter walked forward into God’s mysterious plan. As the apostle did so, God opened Peter’s eyes, heart, and mind to the fact that the gospel is for everyone. We, too, must embrace God’s impartial love for all mankind and demonstrate that love to every soul we encounter.

To whom can you share the impartial love of God through the gospel message?

PRAY: God, help us to love unconditionally, especially those different from us. Remind us of Your love and mercy that we may extend it to others.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Thousands there are . . . who neither know the gospel in truth, nor come to God by this mediator. They live not by the faith of the Son of God, nor have just reason, according to the gospel, to expect divine favour and forgiveness. Blessed God, enlighten the thousands of dark and wretched mankind, and lead them in thy appointed way to happiness.”²

–Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

POINT 1: GOD ACCEPTS ALL PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THE GOSPEL (ACTS 10:34-43).

+ COMMENTARY

“Peter expands his interpretation of the vision, saying that he understands now ‘that God shows no partiality’ to anyone, regardless of ethnic or cultural background (v. 34); ‘nation’ refers primarily not to lines on a modern map but to sociolinguistic groups (v. 35). Thus ‘every nation’ refers to every group of people on earth. Their racial pedigree does not matter; what counts is living in fear of God and doing what pleases him. These are what mark the people whom God accepts, not food or ethnicity. Verse 35 strikes the same note as the testimony about Cornelius: God accepts everyone who ‘fears him and does what is right’ (cf. vv. 2, 4, 22, 31). As before, this does not introduce the idea of salvation by works or some sort of mix of works and grace but rather highlights the fact that God welcomes all people in the gospel. This is not a systematic comment about the basis of salvation at large, and the word ‘accept’ should not be pressed to mean more than it does in this particular context. Cornelius was not saved before Peter arrived (11:14). The idea is simply that God welcomes all people ‘on the same basis as the Jews.’ Neither is there a hint of pluralism, as though Peter implies that even apart from Christ God accepts anyone who ‘does what is right.’ After all, Peter will end the sermon by declaring that forgiveness of sins comes through faith in Jesus (10:43).”³

+ ILLUSTRATION

What came first: the chicken or the egg? This age-old question has provided some lively discussions over the centuries. Many evolutionists’ answer is that a chicken egg came first. Two birds that were not yet technically chickens passed down their mutations that created an embryo of a new species. Creationists believe that the chicken came first. God could have created either (or both!), but it makes most sense that He formed at least two chickens in mature form in the beginning.

This situation is known as a causality dilemma. The answer may be up for debate, but the dependent cycle is true either way. You can’t have one without the other. In Acts 10:35, Peter mentions that “anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” At first glance, this may look like works-based salvation: If you fear God and do what He says is right, He will accept you. But this flies in the face of other passages which clearly teach salvation is a gift of grace, which individuals must receive by faith. Salvation is unmerited.

EXTRA

There is another clear thread of teaching within Scripture that can help us interpret Peter's words: Christians demonstrate the marks of a soul saved by God. This is not a chicken or egg situation where either can come first. Salvation always comes first. The person who fears God is the person who has been saved by God. The one who is found acceptable to God is the soul who has been declared righteous by God. It is the regenerate Christian who is characterized by doing what is right in the sight of the Lord.

POINT 2: THE SPIRIT'S PRESENCE UNITES WHO PEOPLE BELIEVE THE GOSPEL (ACTS 10:44-48).

+ COMMENTARY

"Always the demonstration of the Spirit serves a single purpose—to show that the advance in witness comes directly from God, is totally due to divine leading. This was especially important in this instance. Peter had already shown his own hesitancy to reach out to Gentiles. More conservative elements in Jerusalem would be even more reticent. Only an undeniable demonstration of divine power could overrule all objections, and God provided precisely that in Cornelius's house. Surely the Spirit had already moved among the Gentiles gathered there in a more inward experience of repentance and faith. Luke hinted at this. The very last words in the Greek text of Peter's sermon before the Spirit descended are 'everyone who believes in him.' The faith of the Gentiles is even more explicit in Peter's report to Jerusalem, where he compared his own experience of belief in Christ and receipt of the Spirit with the experience of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles (11:17). Peter called for the baptism of the Gentiles (v. 47) in language that is highly reminiscent of the Ethiopian eunuch's request for baptism (8:36). As with the eunuch, there was now no barrier, no way anyone could hinder (kōlyō) the baptism of these Gentiles and their full inclusion into the Christian community."⁴

+ ILLUSTRATION

There are many iterations of how to enjoy a cup of coffee. Some like theirs black. Others will only drink one if, after adding half-and-half, it is a particular shade of light brown. Then there are the stockpilers who raid grocery stores for the seasonal pumpkin spice flavor for year-round use. From temperature and roast to creamer and sweetener, most coffee drinkers settle into his or her individual way to drink coffee.

While sweetener and certain roasts must be taste-tested to distinguish any differences, when it comes to creamer, it is evident if something has been added to the cup. Avid coffee drinkers can tell just by looking at their cup of coffee whether it contains enough creamer for their taste.

Similarly, the presence of the Holy Spirit with His people is clearly evident. Especially during this transitional time for the early church, the Spirit confirmed His anointing presence with the same signs and wonders. For Peter, who had been at the original pouring during the festival of Pentecost (Acts 2), as well as when the Spirit came down to the Samaritans (Acts 8), this third pouring out was unquestionable for Peter. The same Spirit who empowered the Jews and Samaritans now indwelt Gentile believers.

POINT 3: THE CHURCH CELEBRATES WHEN PEOPLE BELIEVE THE GOSPEL (ACTS 11:1-3,15-18).

+ COMMENTARY

“Verse 17 refers to refusing or preventing (Gk. *kōlyesai*, ‘stand in ... way’) the baptism of the Gentiles. This is the same verb the Ethiopian eunuch uses in asking, ‘What prevents [*kōlyei*] me from being baptized?’ (8:36), and that Peter uses when asking, ‘Can anyone withhold [*kōlyesai*] water for baptizing these people?’ after seeing the Spirit fall on the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house (10:47). Baptism is an outward sign of membership in the new covenant, the inward sign being the reception of the Spirit (Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36; John 3). Granting baptism to Cornelius and others means recognizing that they believe in Jesus and have received the Spirit. Anyone who receives the Spirit must be allowed to receive baptism.”⁵

+ ILLUSTRATION

Celebrations are a part of life. There are the obvious festivities for huge milestones and commitments such as birthdays, weddings, graduations, and anniversaries. Some have even named the funeral of a loved one a celebration of life. But there are also the smaller yet notable occasions that are cause for joy. A raise in salary, a first step, a sporting victory, or even completing our taxes on time can provide the spark to do something special.

Outside the box of events and milestones, there are people, movements, and ways of life we celebrate. When a public figure takes a stand that goes along with our worldview, that excites us. From the likes, clicks, and shares of posts we agree with, to the posting of our declarations about what brings us joy, we celebrate what we affirm. As Christians, we use the phrase, “Praise the Lord!” at the sound of good news. When a long-time prayer request has been answered in the way we expected, we rejoice, often publicly.

Whether it be special events or a way of life, it is easy to get caught up in the physical and the temporary as the primary things we celebrate, to the neglect of the spiritual and eternal. In Acts 11 we see how God’s people—at first—did not rejoice at the saving of Cornelius and members of his household. Preserving their rituals consumed them. Thus, they missed what God was doing. In His grace, God opened eyes and changed hearts. The same crowd, who called out and criticized Peter, soon after glorified God and rejoiced at the repentance and eternal rescue of the Gentiles. The salvation of souls is the greatest reason to rejoice.

References

1. James Hudson Taylor, *Union and Communion or Thoughts on the Song of Solomon*, Third Edition. (London; Philadelphia; Toronto; Melbourne; Shanghai: Morgan & Scott; China Inland Mission, 1914), 36 [Logos].
2. Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts D.D. in Nine Volumes* (Leeds, United Kingdom: Edward Baines, 1812), 157.
3. James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, *John-Acts*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. IX, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 434–435.
4. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 264.
5. James M. Hamilton Jr. and Brian J. Vickers, 442.