



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

Paul's Second Missionary Journey, Part 4

Acts 17:1-15

December 9, 2007

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- ❑ A little over a year ago, in our quarterly *Simply the Gospel* journal, I opened an article with the statement:

The American Church today is in a crisis.

- ❑ Indeed, this is still the case. According to Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, “If it is true that biblical illiteracy is commonplace in secular culture at large, there is ample evidence that points to similar trends in our churches.”
- ❑ Yet, biblical illiteracy is just a subset of a potentially more fatal problem: anti-intellectualism.
- ❑ According to R.C. Sproul, “We live in what may be the most anti-intellectual period in the history of Western civilization... We must have passion – indeed hearts on fire for the things of God. But that passion must resist with intensity the anti-intellectual spirit of the world.”
- ❑ Furthermore, J.P. Moreland of Talbot School of Theology writes, “The contemporary Christian mind is starved, and as a result we have small, impoverished souls.”
- ❑ Tragically, all of the evidence points to this truth: the Christian mind is starved.
- ❑ The “starving of the Christian mind,” like nearly all problems facing Christianity today, can be traced back to failure in our local churches.
- ❑ In her landmark work, *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey, in a section entitled ***Preacher, Performer, Storyteller***, writes, “[The nineteenth and twentieth centuries] gave rise to leaders who were entrepreneurs – pragmatic marketers who were willing to use whatever worked to get conversions.” The reason for this? Pearcey states, “Theological education began to focus more on practical techniques and less on intellectual training. Even the style of preaching was transformed: Expository preaching on biblical texts gave way to topical sermons on the felt needs of the congregation.”
- ❑ Quoting from Richard Hofstadter in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, “The Puritan ideal of the minister as an intellectual and educational leader [has] steadily weakened in the face of the evangelical ideal of the minister as a popular crusader and exhorter.”
- ❑ She continues, quoting historian Donald Scott, “Earlier, a minister had been expected to provide his congregation with a comprehensive intellectual [theological] system.”
- ❑ Yet, the church has not always been led by men who viewed theology as secondary or even unimportant. Nearly all of the great theologians since the apostle Paul – men such as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox – have shared one thing in common...they were all pastors.

- ❑ Furthermore, here in Acts 17, Paul establishes the apostolic model of engaging the “worldly” ideas of one’s day. To reject this model as irrelevant or unnecessary is to deny the mandate established by the apostles themselves.

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- ❑ Throughout the Book of Acts, Luke has recorded an all too familiar pattern of evangelism in the New Testament church: the apostles enter into a city, preach the Gospel, face resistance [typically from the Jews], and move on to the next town.
- ❑ Persecution was the constant companion of Paul during his missionary travels, and here in Thessalonica and Berea the situation is no different.
- ❑ Luke begins this chapter writing, “Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.” [Verse 1]
 - This passage seems to indicate that the missionary team made the trip from Philippi to Thessalonica in three days.
 - Amphipolis was approximately thirty miles from Philippia; Apollonia was about thirty miles from Amphipolis, and Thessalonica was just under forty miles from Apollonia.
 - Therefore, after traveling about thirty miles a day, Paul, Silas, and Timothy arrived in Thessalonica.
 - Thessalonica, “the metropolis of Macedonia” and the capital of its respective district, has a population of between twenty and one hundred thousand [although some have estimated as many as 200,000 residents].
 - It was a significant city, the poet Antipater referring to it as “the mother of all Macedonia.”
 - Not only this, it was a “little Rome”, remaining very loyal to the capital and the Caesar.

I. Paul Engaged the People and their Ideas

a. He Reasoned with Them

- ❑ The Apostle Paul **actively engaged** the people and ideas of Thessalonica.
- ❑ Unlike so many Christians today, Paul was not afraid to confront the false theologies and philosophies of his day.

- Paul was absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ was the source of all truth.
- In other words, his faith was authentic and immovable. No doubt the sufferings which Paul endured secured his confidence in the reality and sufficiency of the living, risen Christ [Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-3].
- Tragically, Christians today are often intimidated by, even fearful of, the prominent ideas of our day.
- It is as though, if we were to be completely honest with ourselves, we are not 100% confident that Christianity is the only true faith. It is as though we doubt, ever so slightly, and fear that there may be a slight chance that the claims of Scripture are untrue.
- It even seems that many professing believers today believe that by ignoring atheistic philosophies, such as Darwinian evolution, that they will simply go away and disappear.
- As a result, we too often retreat into our “shells” and refuse, out of fear, to do what Paul did – engage the world.
- The reason for this is that, unlike Paul, we have not immersed ourselves in the Scriptures, committing with both our hearts and minds to the glory of God in all things.
- **We are content to remain isolated from the world, weak, impotent, and, worst of all, unwilling and thoroughly unable to contend for the faith and to confront the issues of our day. The vast majority of Christians today could never articulate why Christianity stands alone as the only true faith in the midst and ever-changing, pluralistic world.**

□ This past week, the movie *The Golden Compass* was released. It is based on a novel by Philip Pullman, one of Great Britain’s most outspoken atheists. In fact, Pullman was quoted in the Washington Post in 2001 as “trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief.” The film, released on December 5, promotes the rejection of organized religion and presents a worldview that stands in direct contrast to historical Christianity. As a result, several Christian groups have warned against viewing the movie, while others have called for an all-out boycott of the film. Yet, will ignoring the views of such an anti-Christian film cause those views to vanish? The manner, so it appears, in which we are called to defeat such aberrant views is not through willful ignorance; but rather, through biblical [loving] confrontation with the truth. We must be willing to engage the deeper issues that are revealed in the movie if we are to win not only hearts but minds! We cannot live lives of quiet paranoia and simply ignore our call to confront such falsehood.

- Yet, we tragically do not know what we believe or why we believe it, **and we do not care.**
- Bertrand Russell, the 20th Century atheistic British philosopher and 1950 Nobel Prize Winner in Literature wrote, “**Most Christians would rather die than think – in fact they do.**”

In his work, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll writes of Charles Malik, a Lebanese diplomat, scholar, and Eastern Orthodox believer who was invited in 1980 to open the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College with an address. Few expected that Malik’s speech would be direct and incriminating of the state of the church in America.

“The greatest danger besetting American Evangelical Christianity is the danger of anti-intellectualism. The mind as to its greatest and deepest reaches is not cared for enough... Who among the evangelicals can stand up to the great secular or naturalistic or atheistic scholars on their own terms of scholarship and research? Who among the evangelical scholars is quoted as a normative source by the greater secular authorities on history or philosophy or psychology or sociology or politics? Does your mode of thinking have the slightest chance of becoming the dominant mode of thinking in the great universities of Europe and America which stamp your entire civilization with their own spirit and ideas?...For the sake of greater effectiveness in witnessing to Jesus Christ Himself, as well as for their own sakes, the Evangelicals cannot afford to keep on living on the periphery of responsible intellectual existence.”

- Notice the manner in which Paul engaged the people: He **reasoned** with them. The word for reasoned, [Greek, *dialogomai*, διαλεγωμαι] is the root for the English word **dialogue**.
- In other words, Paul not only engaged the people, he **interacted with them**.
- This truth is consistent with Peter’s words in 1 Peter 3:15: “...but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.”
- Again, the apostolic model calls us to be able to interact with those who do not agree with us so that we might demonstrate the truth and validity of biblical Christianity. **We cannot simply tell the world, “You are wrong.” We should tell them why they are wrong.**
- Not only did Paul reason with the people of Thessalonica, but he did so **“for three Sabbaths.”** Thus, he took the time needed to demonstrate the truth of the risen Christ.
- But then, Luke explains **how** Paul reasoned with the Thessalonians:

<p>b. He Explained the Scriptures and gave Biblical Evidence</p>

- Luke writes, "...[he] reasoned with them **from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence** that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead..."
 - Paul did not simply say, "Just love Jesus." He **explained** and **gave evidence** as to why it was that he embraced Jesus as the Christ.
 - Further, it was **from the Scriptures** that Paul explained and gave evidence that Jesus was the Christ and had to suffer and rise again from the dead.
 - This statement brings to mind the **explanation of Jesus** in Luke 24:31-32, 45, where Jesus explains to his disciples how He fulfilled all of the Old Testament.
 - Most certainly, **one must know the Scriptures [BOTH the Old and New Testaments]** if he or she is to use it to demonstrate how only Jesus could be the Christ.

- **Furthermore, it is ONLY by studying the Scriptures that we may gain the confidence in Christ that He is the source of all truth, so that we might have the conviction and boldness of Paul to confront the deceiving views of our day.** Otherwise, we will continue to have those slight doubts in our mind, wondering to ourselves, "Is it possible that Christianity could be false?" Then, our only option is to retreat and isolate ourselves [and our families] from the pagan influences of our pluralistic culture. **It is precisely for this reason that the world today has a greater influence on the church than the church on the world.** We have become passive recipients of an atheistic worldview, as opposed to active heralds of biblical truth.

- Although Luke does not provide the Old Testament passages that Paul used, he clearly demonstrated that the Hebrew Scriptures predicted two things concerning the Messiah: (1) He would suffer [Luke 22:15; 24:26, 46; Acts 1:3; 2:23; 3:18; 26:22-23] and (2) that He would be raised [Luke 24:46; Acts 2:22-24; 10:41; 13:32-36].
 - It is significant to note that a belief in a resurrection of an individual within the bounds of history was unique in Judaism in the first century. The Pharisees did believe in a resurrection; however, it was believed that the resurrection would occur at the end of time.

II. Paul Proclaimed Jesus

a. He Declared Jesus as the Risen Christ

- Paul's teaching not only included a well-reasoned argument from the Scriptures, thus confirming Christ's identity; but, it also included the **bold proclamation of Jesus as the one and only risen Christ** – the fulfillment of the Old Testament writings!

b. He Declared Jesus as the King

- ❑ Further, Paul hailed Jesus as King – a claim that amounted to sedition in the Roman Empire.
- ❑ This is clear from the later charge of the people in **Verse 7**, when they accuse Paul and Silas of “saying that there is another king, Jesus.”
- ❑ This parallels the very charge against Jesus that led to His crucifixion [Luke 23:2-4; John 19:12, 15].
- ❑ John Polhill writes, “Jesus claimed a kingdom not of this world, and Paul and Silas spoke of the same. But to a Roman, the charge sounded very much like a breach of the oath of loyalty that every person in the empire was required to render to Caesar.”
- ❑ Given Paul’s later writings in 1 Thessalonians, it is quite possible that he was teaching the people of the city to turn from idols (1 Thessalonians 1:9), to embrace the coming of Jesus as God’s Son (1 Thessalonians 4:15; 1:10), and taught of a kingdom of God (1 Thessalonians 2:12).
 - Paul’s teaching on the “coming of Jesus as God’s Son” was, in 1 Thessalonians, the teaching of the *parousia*.
 - This term was used, in Greek, for the visitation of a king. Where as, for the Christian, it referred to the return of the King of Kings.
- ❑ Yet, the main point is that Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as the Risen Christ and King [of Kings] demanded that the people of Thessalonica change their loyalties and allegiances to an authority that is greater than Caesar!
- ❑ Even today, if our proclamation of the Gospel does not include [or at least imply] such a call [to change loyalties], then it is not the Gospel we are proclaiming.

III. Paul Persuaded People to Consider Christ

- ❑ After the Apostle Paul **reasoned, explained, gave evidence, and proclaimed** Jesus as the Christ, Luke writes, in **Verse 4**, “...some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.”
- ❑ It is essential to realize that Paul did not “persuade” the people to “accept Christ” by clever words and skill.
- ❑ Rather, he demonstrated that faith in Christ, while a sovereign gift from God, is not the result of a blind act of the will. In other words, the concept of a “blind leap of faith” is foreign to historical Christianity.

- Paul showed that [while Christ Himself is incomprehensible, being fully God] faith in Christ is reasonable, logical, and perfectly consistent with Old Testament prophecies.
- It is interesting that Luke says, in **Verse 4**, “And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, **along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.**”
 - Ancient manuscripts seem to indicate that the phrase “leading women” could also be translated “women *of the prominent.*”
 - In other words, they may have been wives of prominent men in the city of Thessalonica.
 - Thus, men and women of all walks of life are embracing the universal Gospel.

IV. Paul Faced Persecution

- Yet, though some were persuaded, others, as always, hated Paul because of his message, seeking to silence him at any cost.
- Luke writes, in **Verses 5-8**, “But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things.”
 - So radical is the teaching of Paul, that the Jews “set the city in an uproar...”
 - In fact, they most certainly believed that Paul and Silas **deserved death**. The reason for this was, the accusation of sedition – “acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”
 - Again, this was the charge that “stuck” in the Roman trials of Jesus.
 - It was a charge for which the punishment was death.
 - Yet notice as well, the accusation of the people towards Paul and Silas: “These men...have upset the world...”
 - This phrase is also rendered in some translations, “**These men...have turned the world upside down...**”

- According to John Stott, “[The phrase] means...that they were causing a radical social upheaval. The verb *anastatoo* has revolutionary overtones and is used in 21:38 of an Egyptian terrorist who ‘started a revolt.’”
 - There could hardly be a greater compliment to the missionaries.
 - It was their teaching [or rather, the teaching of Scripture], not their actions, that threatened the very fabric of the pagan Greco-Roman world.
 - **Of those of us today, whom could such an accusation be made against?**
 - Yet, Paul and Silas’s words were so biblical that they penetrated to the very core of what the people [to include the Jews] held so dearly. The words of Paul and Silas, spoken in love, were more than the people could handle.
- Luke mentions “Jason,” which was a common name in the Greek world
 - We do not know the identity of Jason, other than that he was one of the brethren.
 - He is dragged before the authorities [*politarchs* – of which Thessalonica would have had five or six at this time] and accused of welcoming Paul and Silas.
 - Then in **Verse 9** Luke writes, “And when they [the politarchs, or city authorities] had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.”
 - It is likely that this “pledge” was an agreement or an assurance that Jason would ensure that Paul and Silas would leave the city and never return.
 - It is quite possible that this “pledge” is what Paul refers to in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-18:

“...For I wanted to come to you – I, Paul, more than once – and yet Satan hindered us.” [Verse 18]

- Therefore, for the sake of stability in Thessalonica, it seems that the Christians send Paul away to Berea [**Verse 10**]: “The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.”

V. The People Examined the Scriptures
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- When Paul and Silas arrived in Berea, they did as they always did: they went to the synagogue [**Verse 10**].

- Then in **Verse 11** Luke writes, “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”
 - Since the first century, the Bereans have become the standard of godliness and **discernment**.
 - The reason is that they did not simply take what Paul said and blindly follow him.
 - Rather, they *examined the Scriptures daily*...
 - The word that Luke uses here is *anakrino*, a word often used for a legal or judicial examination or investigation.
 - In other words, the people of Berea carefully, methodically, and diligently examined the words of Paul in light of the Scriptures.
 - They did not use their feelings, their emotions, or what they thought was true; but rather, they used the objective, unchanging canon of Scripture as the final court of arbitration.
 - As a result, Luke refers to them as “**more noble than the Thessalonians.**” Unfortunately, Bereans today are labeled, not *noble*, but “trouble-makers.”
 - Luke’s words concerning the Bereans is a clarion call to the “lay-people” of the church to ensure that what they hear from the pulpit is truly biblical.
 - The Bereans exist, not as a “good option” for Christians; but rather, as a biblical mandate to all Christians to exercise biblical discernment.

VI. Paul Persisted in His Calling
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- After speaking the truth to the Bereans, Luke writes that “many of them believed...prominent Greek women and men.” **Verse 12**
- However, it should be as no surprise that, along with believers, there were those who rejected Paul and Silas’s message and, once again, sought to silence them.
- According to **Verse 13-14**, “But when Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there.”

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- Yet, one of the most profound truths of this passage is Paul’s continued persistence of the pursuit of God’s glory in light of opposition that never ceased.
- Rarely today do we demonstrate this fundamental Christian virtue of persistence.

- When things do not go our way, we too often believe that God’s will for our lives suddenly changes [or at least this is how we attempt to justify our decisions].
- Rather, God’s will always includes persecution of those He loves. In fact, it is only through this persecution that we learn perseverance [Romans 8].
 - Thus, the reason why we rarely persevere as Christians today, is that we avoid suffering, opposition and persecution at all costs. When we see it coming, we run the other direction.
- Once again, it goes back to expectations. We expect that if we are in God’s will, life will be relatively “smooth sailing.” When the “seas get rough,” we head for shore, never persevering and persisting through the storm to a greater understanding of God Himself.
- According to Benjamin Franklin, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”
 - There is certainly truth to this; however, the underlying point here is that life should be results-driven.
 - Thus as Christians, when we do not get the results we expect, we change what we are doing as many times as it takes to get the result we expect and desire.
 - Yet, the only thing we should expect is God’s glory through our personal obedience.
 - This is why Paul continued doing the same thing [and experienced the same results]; because his expectations [God’s glory through his obedience] were biblical and were being met.

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- So, this section ends just as it began, with Paul traveling to a new city: Athens.
- Athens was the intellectual capital of the western world at that time, and Paul would soon engage the intellectual elite of his day in one of the deepest theological and philosophical debates recorded in the Scriptures.
- He was most certainly prepared to do so, however, as he sought to glorify God with all he had...to include his mind.

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- In the 5th Century, B.C., the great Athenian philosopher Socrates [who was not a believer in the God of the Scriptures] said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

- Yet, what becomes clear in this section and throughout the chapter is that “the unexamined Scriptures are not worth following.”
 - As strange [or even controversial] as this may sound, I say it with absolute confidence that the Scriptures are absolutely true.
 - In the nineteenth century, German atheistic socialist philosopher Karl Marx wrote, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. **It is the opium of the people** [or masses].”
 - Yet, as blasphemous as this statement sounds [and certainly was on the lips of Marx], there is tragic truth to it.
 - For many within the Christian masses today, Christianity [or more appropriately in these cases, religion] serves only to temporarily ease the difficulty of living in a perfect world.
 - Yet this is not how we are commanded to live, through lives...aimlessly “walking through the motions.”
 - I would submit that if Marx, or any other individual seeking to attack Christianity, had known Paul, Silas, or these Bereans personally, they would have had a fundamentally different perspective on Christianity.
 - Thus, when we place our faith in the Scriptures, or more accurately, the God of the Scriptures, and examine the Word daily, we then realize that the exalted Christ and He alone is worthy of all our energy, worship, adoration and praise!