

The Gospel That Provokes

Acts 17:1-15

2/8/2015

Randy Lovelace

Let's turn together in God's Word as we continue to go through the Book of Acts together as we are now arriving in the Book of Acts chapter seventeen. And this portion of Acts chapter seventeen is often skipped over because everybody wants to get to Paul later on in seventeen as he goes before the Areopagus in Athens. But indeed, a lot happens in the two towns which we read about in the early part of chapter seventeen, in Thessalonica and Berea, and what happens there. And it becomes a model for what happens as he goes before the philosophers of the Roman Empire. So as we turn there this morning, these two events go by relatively quickly. But they also give us the great ground of the gospel and how Paul continues to minister in His name. Let's look together, then, at Act 17:1-15.

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 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." 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. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 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. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word that gives us the continuing drama of the church of Jesus Christ in its earliest days, and how you by your Holy Spirit through your servants, through great trial and difficulty, ignited changes of hearts, brought people to yourself. And even in the midst of trial and persecution, the gospel went forth all the more boldly. What man meant for evil, you, O Lord, meant

for good. Now this Word has come to us as it is recorded. Help us to learn from it, be equipped by it, and to apply it. In Jesus' holy and matchless name we pray. Amen.

So you'll see there in our outline, I've put there a chronological outline according to the text. And you'll see Paul is committing himself to the proclaiming of Christ. But then we also see the attitude of reception in both cities. But finally – and here I was greatly helped by the late, great pastor Doctor John Stott as he pointed to this idea of doctrine verses indoctrination, and how, for Paul and for the Christian faith, this is what separates the Christian faith from every other faith. And we will see how, and what we are to do with it.

So first, the proclaiming of Christ. One of the very first things that you see as Paul goes to Thessalonica and to Berea, his normal practice was to first find the Jewish synagogue. And in going to that Jewish synagogue, his first desire was to proclaim the gospel to his brothers, to his people. And so as he has done in the past, he continues to do in these two cities. And he goes to the synagogue. And what he does, as you will see—two things happen in both cities.

First, let's look at the method of his proclaiming Christ, first in Thessalonica. As you read through this passage, and perhaps you've heard it read for the first time this morning, you'll be struck by the verbs that are used describing Paul's proclamation of Christ in Thessalonica. Quickly summarizing them. He says first he reasoned with them from the Scriptures. He explained from the Scriptures. He proved the necessity for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, saying this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ.

And so what Paul does is the verbs of his proclamation was that he sought in Thessalonica to argue, to reason, to proclaim, and to show that Christ is the absolute representation, the revelation, of the God of the Old Testament. Because you'll remember, Paul would not have had a New Testament. It wasn't written yet. He would not have opened up his Bible to what we call the New Testament. And you have my permission, by the way, to go into all your Bibles and that little page that separates the Old and New Testament that has the title page that says the New Testament? Take it out. They're one testament telling one grand story.

But where Paul would have gone was the Old Testament. Because again, when he's dealing with those who are of Jewish heritage and Jewish faith, he always turned to the Old Testament. You'll see something happen differently when he goes to Athens. But here when he's in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles—you'll remember these God-fearing Greeks were those who were of Gentile birth but who had a great deal of respect and honor and would worship along with the Jewish people.

And here in Thessalonica he sought to argue, which means this: he sought to do all of this grounded in the Old Testament text of its description of God who is Yahweh. The God who is the covenant God of Israel. The God who is merciful, who is eternal. The God who has created all things from nothing. The God who has made a pledge to Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph. The God who brought David into the throne of Israel. The God who worked through Solomon to establish the temple. The God who spoke through his prophets. This God who reasoned and also who presented himself in the cloud and the fiery pillar. The God who revealed himself in the Old Testament was Yahweh, and now Paul, much like Jesus did with his disciples—as you can read about in chapter 24 of Luke—how Jesus reasoned with his disciples, though they did not recognize him because he veiled his identity. But he reasoned with them, beginning with Moses, showing them how all of the Scriptures point to Jesus. This is precisely the model that Paul used in his proclamation, in his method of declaring Christ. More on this in a few minutes.

But we must also not only look at the method, but also the meaning. The meaning, you'll see here, is this very simple message: that Christ, the Christ, must suffer, he must die, and he must be raised from the dead. He is the Christ. And though we do not know in detail what particular verses Paul used as the background, the meaning of the message and the proclamation of Jesus, we could at least guarantee he would have used the Book of Isaiah and the great servant's songs, and Isaiah in the fiftieth chapters where it is declared that this One would not be worthy on his outward appearance of any attention from us, but rather, he would come to be the Lamb who was slain for the salvation of his people. But that he would rise victorious over his enemies. This is the God who is Yahweh, the God who is now coming in full revelation in Jesus Christ just as Jesus would say—if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.

I must tell you that if you are a Christian, you might be tempted to say, "Ho hum." But the reality is there is absolutely no point in history where for any human being it could be said that it would be an expectable conclusion that one would come to that first, there is one God three persons, and that that God would reveal himself in covenant relationship with a specific people—and then the promise of revealing himself in the flesh both fully God and fully man, then to die on a cross to be raised on the third day in the middle of history, and then to promise to come again to restore all things. That was never an expected conclusion. It wasn't for the Jews. It isn't for the Gentiles—either in the Old Testament or the New. This is absolutely scandalous to the ears of every human being. It is never an expected conclusion. And everywhere Paul went—and therefore I can say—every single ministry, everything we do, must be bathed in the authority of God's revelation of himself, the covenant-keeping God who said, "You, as human beings, have rebelled against me. But I created you and called you good. But even in your wickedness, I revealed my covenant love to you as one God, three persons. And I will send my Son. And he will crush the head of the serpent."

This has always been the authority of the proclamation and the method that Paul even now would take a group of Jewish people in the synagogue in the first century and say, "You know the Messiah? Jesus is not one among many. He is the One who is Yahweh in the flesh." This is the method and also the message, the content. And it must bathe everything we do as a church.

This is because this is God's mission. God has always intended that the people who he created would be the bearers of his message, of his covenant-keeping love, of his forgiving mercy, of his sacrificial care. And God has always been on the mission of declaring to the nations that this is who he is. First he sought to do it through Adam and Eve, and they failed. Then he sought to do it at the time of Moses, but there was wickedness and he chose a family. Then after that he chose a man out of Ur of the Chaldeans, Abraham, and from that man created a family, and from a family created a nation. Israel was always to be the bearer of God's divine love. But Israel failed. Why? Because believing in a monotheistic, covenant-keeping, loving, merciful, sacrificing God was never an expected conclusion. Because our hearts rebel, as did Israel. But even despite that failure, God continued on the mission to announce to the nations that this is who I am to the point of dying on a cross and being raised on the third day. And now he's gathered to himself the church so that the church might take this message of Christ crucified, Christ victorious over death and sin, Christ will come again that we—the church of Jesus Christ—might bear that message in all that we do—not for us, but for the mission of God. This is what Paul was preaching.

But what was the attitude of reception? Clearly in both cities it was not unanimous. In both places, Jews were converted. In both places, Greeks from all different strata of life were converted to Jesus Christ. But in Thessalonica, what happened first was a riot. Now, it's easy to read over this and sort of put our own idea of what took place here. But what they were accusing Paul of gets to precisely the scandalous nature of the message of Jesus Christ. They used a word with regard to describing what Paul was doing

when it describes in verse six and seven: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” What they are describing there is nothing less than homegrown terrorism. The word described here as “turning the world upside down” is only used twice. Once here, and again later in the Book of Acts describing an Egyptian-born terrorist. And here what they’re describing is what Paul is saying, what he is doing, is tantamount to treason. And so they were jealous of people coming and hearing the message that Paul was preaching, of being converted to Jesus Christ, and their jealousy ended up in covetousness and had itself in the fine-edged knife of seeking to do away with him. And so they stirred up all kinds of attention.

There was a riot, violence, accusing him of treasonous acts. It is because to say that Jesus is Yahweh is to say the King has come, and he ain’t Caesar. The King has come, and he’s not the Jewish religious leaders. The King has come with a message to set the prisoners free, which is dangerous for those who want to keep people under the thumb of oppression and indoctrination. Jesus has come as the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the God above all gods—not one among many, but the God of gods. This was treasonous. And so they rioted. And that caused Paul to leave. And so they left for Berea.

Now, we learn just early enough in the letter of 1 Thessalonians when you hear of what this did to the ministry of Paul. Chapter two of 1 Thessalonians, he says, “For you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure.” Getting kicked out of the city at the point of arrival, Paul looks back and says, “You know what? It was not a failure.” “But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.” And then he continues and says:

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.

Getting kicked out of the city because of a riot, having preached there only for about three weeks, having to leave under threat of their own lives—Paul would write them later and say, “Guess what? It was not a failure.” God is on the march. The King is drawing people into his kingdom. And he can now look at those converts and say, “You are my joy and my glory, because you are evidence that God is on the move.” Despite the riot.

If God is for us, who can be against us, Christian? Should we fear nakedness or death, sword? No. If we are kicked out of this building and not allowed to worship here, does it mean we are a failure? Absolutely not. If suddenly, somehow, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is outlawed—unlikely, but who knows—does it mean we are a failure? Absolutely not. Does it mean God is not on the move? Absolutely not. It wasn’t then, and it won’t be now. No matter the riot.

But there was also, as they moved to Berea, a very different response. Though it was not unanimous, they received a reception of careful consideration. And so what did they do? They took the Scriptures that Paul preached, that Jesus is the manifestation of the Yahweh of the Old Testament, and the text tells us these Jews were of more noble character. Meaning they didn’t get outrageously angry. They listened to what Paul said.

And then this unique phrase: “They received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” Do you know that’s the only invitation that Christianity

offers, is that you consider what the Scriptures teach regarding Jesus, to receive them, to at least consider them, to ask questions of it, and let it speak on its own account. That's what the Bereans did. It did not mean wholesale acceptance, but they received a hearing. And it tells us in verse twelve, instead of riot, many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

You see, what one thing is—we're so tempted to receive attack, persecution, people just ignoring you because of your faith—and you're tempted to think, "I'm not a failure. It's not getting through. I have no hope." Go back to passages like this. Because even though they saw the Lord on the move in Thessalonica, they were certainly moved in a way they would not have planned. But God took them to Berea. Why? Because he had a divine appointment with people they had never met, in ways they could never have imagined. And they received Paul, and they listened. And many were converted.

This goes all the way back to the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, which actually I happen to be in the middle of reading right now in my own time with the Lord. After years in prison, being sold by his brothers, being lied about and lied to—what man meant for evil, God meant for good. What could that mean for your life today? What could it mean for decisions that you are anxious about? What could it mean for the opposition that you so palpably feel because of your Christian faith? Or if not opposition, people just ignoring you. Whatever it might be, this passage has something to say about how mighty is our God, to work even in the most difficult of circumstances.

But finally, doctrine verses indoctrination. And here, again, I am greatly thankful as I was reading in preparation for the congregational meeting the book, "The Mission of God" by Christopher Wright. I was reminded of this as I was preparing because this idea of what Paul was doing in preaching Christ—he was preaching the drama of what God has done in revealing himself through Jesus in a very doctrinal way, but not trying to indoctrinate.

Let me explain what I mean. The doctrine which Paul appealed to is, as Christopher Wright rightly defines, is this: when Paul goes back to the Old Testament and demonstrates how the Scriptures point to Jesus, how God, Yahweh, is revealed through the person of Christ, he wasn't acting the doctrine of a Christocentric monotheism. Meaning this: it is not that Paul or we line Jesus up with all the other messiahs and all the other gods so that at the end of our study we can by comparative process decide whether Jesus is the best from all the rest—or, less competitively, to simply come to the conclusion that Jesus is the one for me. That is not what Paul or we are engaged in.

Rather, Wright says, we are engaged vertically in the tracing of the Scriptural roots of the identity, mission, and accomplishments of Jesus deeply into the uniqueness of Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel. Jesus is not put up and then compared to all the others. Rather, he is put and demonstrated as unique—but not uniqueness in a way that you and I are all unique. That's self-evident. But Jesus has a particular uniqueness. And going back to the monotheism of the Old Testament and tracing it all the way to the New—that God is one God, Yahweh, the covenant-keeping, loving, merciful, sacrificial God is Jesus Christ. One God, three persons, for our salvation. This was for Paul and would always remain the core message of the gospel, and ought to be for us.

Who is Jesus? Don't begin in Matthew. Who is Jesus? Begin in Genesis. And everywhere you see God acting, everywhere you see God loving, God sacrificing, God forgiving, God giving—you will see Jesus. Because when Jesus was made known, he would say, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." If you want to know the character of God, look at Jesus. If you want to know the character of Jesus, look to God. And his Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, brings that to bear on our hearts.

So Paul's preaching, as is ours, is deeply embedded in doctrinal truths taken from the drama, the story of God's mission in the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. But Christianity is never—and ought to never—be indoctrination. When faiths in the world—for example, Islam—moves into a place and teaches, it teaches doctrine but does so by way of indoctrination. Meaning that you must adhere to certain practices; you must adhere to particular beliefs in particular way; you must have certain habits that order your life; you must conduct your life in exactly this way. If you do not, you will receive punishment.

This is the message of every other faith outside of Christianity, because they—always at the back side of their teaching and doctrine is this: you must do this, believe this, act like this, behave in this exact way, follow these steps. That is not what Christianity teaches. And here I am thankful for a brother in Christ, Kenneth Tanner, as he writes this: "When all is said and done, many Christians may be tempted to look to their habits, their faith, and their perseverance when it comes to salvation. But we must always preach and always remember that Christ alone is our salvation. Christ saves me, not the accuracy and purity of my beliefs."

I want to say this again: in a county that has represented in it some of the most highly educated people in the country, Christ saves you and saves me not because of the accuracy and purity of my beliefs. Christ saves me not by my works or activism. Christ saves me not by the measure of my adherence to a doctrine or practice. Christ saves me alone because of his faithfulness. Jesus saves you, he saves me—not because of my adherence or your adherence to a faith, but because of his perfect adherence to the will of the Father. We are not saved because of our works righteousness, our church attendance, the frequency of your Bible reading. We are not saved because of the accuracy of your sacramental practice of the Lord's Supper or baptism. We are not saved because we give more than other people, because of our charitable works. And also, ladies and gentleman, we are not saved because of our intellectual works. We are saved ultimately and only by trusting and receiving the absolute finish, the absolute brilliance, the absolutely matchless work of Jesus, Yahweh, God with us. So what do we offer to the world? It is the same that has been offered to you and to me—from beginning to last and everything in between, it is all of grace. Grace, grace, greater than all my sin. Let's pray.

By your Holy Spirit, O Lord, may you whisper your grace in every heart and in every ear, and may you by your Holy Spirit so draw each of us into the one chief thing we've been called to do—to worship you and to enjoy you forever, because of the grace and work of Jesus Christ. Lord, we thank you that you do not lead us into submission, but you love us to repentance. You do not force us into adherence. You draw us by your kindness. You preserve us not by your strength, O Lord, but by your sustaining, sovereign power. Do this, O Lord, for your glory, for your mission to the nations, and for our salvation. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.