

7. Luke's account suggests that the Thessalonian authorities had charged Jason and the brethren with him to have nothing further to do with this strange teaching and the men promoting it. The same prohibition obviously applied to Paul and his companions, and not being residents of Thessalonica, they also were likely ordered to leave the city and not return. But the indignation at Thessalonica against the gospel clearly exceeded civil opposition; the fact that the brethren sent Paul and his fellow missionaries away under the cover of night indicates that they feared for their lives. The authorities opposed the gospel in the interest of civil peace and order; the Jews came against it with a fury expressive of their fearful concern that this "way" opposed everything they believed in. More than that, if allowed to continue, it would destroy the very system and way of life that provided them their identity and status.

Driven from Thessalonica by civil edict and the threat of death, Paul and his companions continued on to Berea, which lay inland from the Aegean about 45 miles to the southwest. Compared to Philippi and Thessalonica, Berea was a small and relatively insignificant Macedonian city. Among other things, it lay off the Via Egnatia to the south; hence Cicero referred to it as "an out-of-the-way town." Given that the other ministry sites in Paul's second mission were all leading cities, it raises the question as to why the men travelled to Berea. They had merely passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia; why travel to Berea and minister the gospel there?

Luke indicated that the Thessalonian brethren sent them to Berea (17:10), but he gave no reason for their action. Berea was off the beaten path, and they may have believed that it would provide the missionaries with safe haven after the fracas at Thessalonica. They probably reasoned that it would be best if Paul and his associates assumed a low profile for awhile, especially given the larger troubles emerging in the Empire.

A few years earlier the emperor Claudius had been obliged to address violent Jewish/Greek conflict at Alexandria. In addition, a fervent Jewish messianism was spreading throughout the Roman provinces. Soon riots were occurring in Rome itself, probably due to Jewish hostility against Rome's emerging Christian population (as happened at Thessalonica). This resulted in Claudius' decision (circa 49 A.D.) to expel all the Jews (and so Jewish Christians) from Rome (ref. 18:1-2).

The import of this for the Church is that Rome early on regarded Christianity as a sect of Judaism and treated Christians accordingly. Roman authorities would have viewed Christian "messianism" through the lens of its seditious Jewish counterpart, and Rome's concern with Christianity was only exacerbated by escalating Jewish/Christian violence. Paul's second mission was not only set in the midst of these troubles, it contributed to them. Undoubtedly these concerns were a factor in the decision to travel to Berea.

One thing, however, stands out in Luke's account, and that is the contrast between the insignificance of the city of Berea and the nobility of its Jewish residents. Thessalonica had a large and powerful Jewish population, but one that was narrow, prejudiced and fearful. In contrast, the Jews of Berea were receptive and teachable, open to the truth regardless of where it led them.

a. Thus, while Paul repeated his pattern at Berea of entering the city synagogue, he met with a very different response from its members than he had at Thessalonica (17:11). At Berea, the Jews were receptive to Paul's message – not out of a lack of conviction or commitment to the Scripture, but because of holding them rightly. Their concern was to know the truth revealed in the Scriptures rather than safeguard a doctrine or religious tradition. Luke described them as open-minded and non-prejudicial, willing to listen to the things Paul was saying and seeking to demonstrate from the Scripture without prejudging either them or him. The Bereans were eager to hear him out, yet not as gullible men amenable to every new teaching. They wanted to fully understand his claims and arguments in order to test them against the Scriptures. This highlights two important principles pertaining to communication in general and biblical inquiry in particular:

- 1) The first is the absolute necessity of interacting with what a person is actually saying rather than what he appears to be saying. This is an obvious first principle of communication, but one that, for a myriad of reasons, is usually violated in practice. Among a multitude of other human failings, imprecise thinking, presuppositions, cherished convictions, pride, the need to prevail, and even fear oppose the obligation to truly *hear*.

In order for communication and understanding to take place, both parties must first apply themselves to really listen to the other rather than focus on their own points and opportunities to make them. In practice, most discussions are nothing more than competing monologues. But parties must also approach their interaction in an *inquisitive* manner. They need to ask more questions than make assertions – either with respect to their own points or those being made by their counterpart. Only by such dialogical “back-and-forth” can two people avoid talking past each other and converge on what's actually being affirmed.

- 2) But having come to understand one another, the claims being made must then be measured against some objective standard of truth. In the case of Paul's claims, that standard is the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Paul was arguing for the fulfillment of the Scriptures in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth; the only way to prove or disprove him was to see if the Scriptures indeed prophesy of such a Messiah and such a messianic work.

The “nobility” of the Berean Jews was their commitment to the pursuit of truth at all costs. Unlike so many who have a non-negotiable and often uninformed ownership of their convictions, the Bereans recognized the fact that the person who thinks his knowledge or understanding is full or free of admixture doesn't know as he ought. These Jews didn't feel the need to talk over the top of Paul or contend against straw men and caricatured arguments; they had no agenda other than coming to know more accurately and fully the truth revealed in God's Scriptures. If that led them to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, they would embrace Him joyfully and without reservation.

- b. At the same time, their open eagerness toward Paul's teaching didn't mean that these Bereans were easily convinced. They were sincerely willing to hear him out, but were not about to embrace his gospel without a full inquiry and careful examination. The things Paul was presenting were radically different from what they had always believed the Scripture to teach about Messiah and His kingdom, and they needed to be convinced that his reading and interpretation were correct. Two things in Luke's description express their approach to Paul's teaching:
- 1) First, Luke emphasized their *slowness* and *thoroughness*: Day after day, the Berean Jews carefully and methodically examined Paul's gospel, scrutinizing it in the light of the Scriptures themselves.
 - 2) Secondly, Luke noted their *caution*: The Bereans approached their inquiry with a healthy dose of skepticism; they were open to hear what Paul had to say and were sincerely committed to understanding and considering his claims in the light of careful examination. But this was a new and strange teaching and more was needed for them to embrace it than simply a persuasive or intimidating presentation. Luke's grammar indicates that they were skeptical about "these things being so," and they weren't about to alter their views until they were thoroughly convinced.
- c. The result of this ongoing inquiry was that many of the synagogue members came to faith in Christ (cf. 20:4). And as at Thessalonica, the gospel ministry at Berea also gathered in numerous Gentiles. Once again Luke mentioned among those converts prominent individuals, including women of high estate (17:12, cf. 17:4). The reason for this mention isn't entirely clear, but his likely intention was to highlight key aspects of the gospel's work in building Christ's kingdom.
- 1) First of all, though many prominent Gentiles believed the gospel, many others didn't. Not only did the gospel remain foolishness to them, the Jews were able to prevail upon many of them to join in opposing it and those who were promoting it in their communities (ref. 13:44-50).
 - 2) Like their Jewish counterparts, such Gentiles also had a vested interest in standing against the gospel. For all their supposed righteous outrage at what they decried as blasphemy, the Jews – especially the synagogue leaders – were actually motivated by selfish concerns. So it was with the prominent Gentiles: Though coming from a different vantage point, they shared essentially the same concerns. *Both groups saw in the gospel a palpable threat to their personal status, if not their power and influence.*
- Wealthy or not, Jews who embraced this gospel would suffer the loss of their Jewish identity, family and community; the cost for Jewish leaders would be even higher. Non-Jews didn't have the same familial and cultural barriers to faith, but leading Gentiles also had much to lose by confessing this lowly Jew to be the Son of God and Savior of the world.

- 3) The cost of confessing Jesus was especially high at that point in the first century. The imperial authority was keenly sensitive to the messianism spreading among the Empire's Jews and violence involving Jews and Christians was becoming a thorn in Rome's side. The populace in the provinces was aware of these things and people were nervous about being implicated in this schismatic "way." *For a Gentile who enjoyed wealth and high standing, what could be more foolhardy than to jeopardize everything by being linked with a group considered seditious by Rome?*

The personal implications of faith in Jesus were even graver for prominent women. The Greco-Roman world was fiercely patriarchal and women enjoyed virtually no rights. They were regarded as the property of their fathers and then of their husbands. A woman's wealth and status came from her connection with a man; she had no means of self-support and needed to be married (or provided for) to survive. For women of means and stature, rejection and ostracism meant the loss of everything.

Thus Luke's repeated mention of prominent women coming to faith emphasizes the compelling nature and power of the gospel in the Spirit's hand. From the divine side, the Spirit's illumining and renewing power is able to triumph even with those who have the most to lose. But from the human side, the glory of the gospel is such that no earthly endowment or possession can compare with it for those whose minds have been illumined to it (Matthew 13:44-46).

- d. But for all the gospel's glorious triumph, it achieves its victory in the context of unceasing opposition. Even while Jews and prominent Gentiles in Berea were embracing Christ in faith, opposing forces were gathering. The open-minded discernment of the Berean Jews was soon confronted with the furious prejudice of their Thessalonian counterparts. Those Jewish opponents weren't content to rid their own city of this pernicious teaching; when they learned that Paul and his companions were in Berea, they traveled there with the same intent to stir up the city's residents and drive them and their doctrine away (17:13).

Before long the Thessalonian Jews were able to achieve the same effect among the populace of Berea and Paul was compelled once again to flee. This time, however, realizing that opposition was going to follow the gospel throughout the region, the brethren sent him east toward the sea so that he and his escorts could quickly exit Macedonia and make their way south toward Athens (17:14-15).

- e. Paul departed Berea (probably with Luke), but he left Timothy and Silas behind. Evidently the team believed an apostolic presence was still needed there for a short season (ref. 17:15b), perhaps to complete the work of establishing the new community of believers. Given Silas' visibility in the Berean ministry, it's very likely that the pair had to continue on in secret. Either way, their commitment to Christ and His saints at Berea came at great cost; Silas and Timothy had no status or fortune to jeopardize, but they were risking their very lives.