

Proclamation That Persuades as It Provokes

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Date: 10 November 2019

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[0 : 00] Okay, do turn to your Bibles and we're going to read together in the book of Acts. Acts chapter 17 and the first 15 verses. That's page 926 in the Red Bibles if you have one of the church ones.

Otherwise, well, if you've got your own Bible, I guess you probably know where Acts is. Chapter 17. So following on from Paul's exciting sojourn in Philippi, we read in chapter 17.

Now when they 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 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.

[1 : 10] As did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were very jealous.

And taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. And attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And they couldn't 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're all acting against the decrees of Caesar.

Saying that this here 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 him go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away. By night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now, these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica.

[2 : 20] They received the word with all eagerness. Examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed.

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. Amen. And may God bless us.

His word. Amen. Well, please do have Acts 17 turned up in your Bibles, page 926. Please do have that open.

[3 : 26] I'm going to avoid looking in this general quadrant, just in case what he does fall asleep. It's very discouraging when people fall asleep. So I'll avoid this area. And you can administer the right elbow fellowship if required.

If required. Well, Luke, who has written this account, this is part two of his account, part one, his gospel, part two, the continuing acts of the risen Lord Jesus.

And he's been clear all through his account that the gospel will be met both by glad acceptance, but also by severe, even murderous opposition.

Again and again, wherever the gospel goes, those are the responses you see. And it's no different as the gospel arrives here in Europe.

It's no different. Perhaps you have the idea that the answer to the frustrations you experience in your own gospel endeavors is a change of location.

[4 : 30] You perhaps see it as a geographic problem. If only I could go over there. If only I could get there then, and only then would I see unfettered gospel advance.

Or sometimes it may just be the case that in one particular place, it's become so hardened to the gospel that the Lord is directing you somewhere else. But even if you do go somewhere else, you're still going to experience very contrasting responses to the gospel.

That's what Luke is showing us here. Moving continent does not change the essence of the gospel or the reaction it provokes. It will still be met by glad acceptance.

But it will also continue to be met by opposition. At every stage of gospel advance, the pattern is always the same, says Luke. It's always going to be a mixture of both of those things.

Now these paragraphs here at the start of chapter 17, they record for us the rest of Paul's time in Macedonia. We've been looking at chapter 16 over the last few weeks in Philippi.

[5 : 38] And there particularly, we've seen where Luke's focus was. It was on individuals. Three individuals and how their lives were turned around by the gospel. The merchant from Thyatira, the slave girl, and the Philippian jailer.

We saw how the Lord was able to invade and turn around the lives of individual people. But now in chapter 17, the focus shifts away from individuals and to the wider impact of the gospel.

And so from Philippi, Paul and a small mission team, they continue down the major road in Macedonia, the M8 of Macedonia, and they head to Thessalonica. And they go via Amphipolis and Apollonia.

Probably a good three days journey from Philippi to Thessalonica. And it was the most populated city in Macedonia. It was the capital of the second district. And Berea, where he'd go next, was a further 45 miles southwest into what we now call modern-day Greece, heading deeper in to Europe. And as Paul and his team head to these new cities, Luke is showing us the pattern of gospel proclamation, but also the reception that proclamation receives.

[6 : 52] He shows us that for some, the gospel persuades. But for others, it provokes. And it provokes not the response of faith, but that of opposition, even severe opposition at times.

So let's look at these three things. First, it's proclamation with a pattern. These are the first few verses of chapter 17. When Paul arrives there in Thessalonica, he finds that there is a synagogue there.

And as was his custom, when there's a synagogue, that's where he goes. It's the same in Berea. It's the same in Corinth. Wherever he goes, if there's a synagogue, that's what he does. That's his pattern.

And what does he do there? Well, verses two and three, for three weeks, three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them. He explained.

He proved. Now, we don't have all the details here. Three Sabbaths worth of preaching are boiled down to two verses. We're not told specifically how Paul reasoned or explained or proved, but we are told that he reasoned from the scriptures.

[8 : 00] He didn't reason from any other source. He went to the scriptures, to what we call the Old Testament. And what was he reasoning? Well, look at verse three.

Paul explained and proved that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead. It was necessary for him to do that.

Paul is proving that what Christ did was exactly what he was meant to do as laid out in the scriptures. This is just what was meant to happen. And he goes on to say that the Christ is, in fact, Jesus.

End of verse three. This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ. Christ, he is the man crucified less than 20 years before these events here.

That's the man. This Jesus. Christ's suffering. His death on the cross. His resurrection. What Paul was talking about here is at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

[9 : 07] The death and resurrection is what Paul spoke about again and again, wherever he went. Even in the next destination in Athens, the end point of that sermon was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It's the very heart of Paul's gospel. And again and again, he deals with Jesus' death and its significance. And the Jews, who Paul was addressing in the synagogue, Well, they strongly registered this idea that the promised Christ, the Messiah, would have to suffer.

They did not like that. The Christ they were looking for and hoping for was likely some sort of political revolutionary. He would restore the nation of Israel to its former glory. But this Christ, the Christ that Paul spoke about, the one who died, was surely not the one promised they thought. Couldn't be. But Paul persuades and reasons from the scriptures that he had to suffer.

It had to be this way. And for many, this would have been a serious stumbling block in their belief in his Messiahship. But Paul actually uses his sufferings.

[10 : 21] He uses Christ's sufferings not as a stumbling block, but as evidence for his Messiahship. It had to be this way. But why? Why was his suffering necessary?

Why did it have to be like this? Why did Paul have to reason and persuade them from the scriptures that it was necessary for him to do that? Well, it's because of the human condition.

Our rejection of God as rightful ruler and king of our lives, that comes with a penalty. And the penalty is serious. The penalty is death.

But God is full of mercy. And he has provided a way, one way, in which our sin problem can be dealt with. And it's Christ's sufferings.

It's what Paul talks about. Jesus Christ, who Paul is speaking about here in these verses, died the death that you and I deserve to die. He died in our place for our sin.

[11 : 24] And as we'll see, Paul's message provokes a range of responses, opposition being one of them. Why such response? Well, the very fact of sin, the very thing that makes this death and resurrection necessary, sin is deeply offensive, isn't it?

It is offensive to me to have to acknowledge that I'm a sinner. That I need something so radical as the death of Jesus and his blood to redeem me.

And we, as well as first century Jews who Paul's addressing here, we find the fact of the cross and that our sin made it necessary so profoundly humbling. We like to think that we can somehow earn our own forgiveness, don't we?

Our rightness with God, we can earn it. But the cross, Christ's sufferings, it puts a very quick end to our efforts to make ourselves right with God.

All that effort is worthless, says Paul. Hence the cross. And hence the range of responses to the message.

[12 : 32] We'll consider them just a moment. But it's clear, isn't it, that this is not a message that Paul would make up to further his own agenda. It's not going to gain in popularity, is it?

But he's preaching this gospel right here in the middle of Europe, following the command of the Lord Jesus Christ, which he gave to him back in chapter 9. This was the essence of Paul's gospel. Showing from the scriptures, reasoning, proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead. And that begs the question, doesn't it?

What is the content of the message we proclaim? What is the essence of our gospel? Is the content of our message the exact same message as Paul's?

The message that Jesus instructs his disciples to spread to all nations. Is it Christ crucified? Is it that he rose from the dead three days later? It is remarkably easy to be ashamed of these basic facts, isn't it?

[13 : 41] Do you feel that temptation to be ashamed? To want to distance yourself from these things? I was watching a very interesting video on YouTube this past week.

Glenn Scrivener, he's an evangelist, was interviewing Tom Holland. He's a historian. He's written about all sorts of interesting books about world religions and their influence.

And he's just written one about Christianity. I've yet to read it. But it's called Dominion. And he talks about how Christianity still today remains a huge influence in our culture.

Explains Western culture. And in the interview, he reflects, and he's an atheist, by the way, Tom Holland. He reflects on the great temptation.

It's his observation. That the temptation for the church is to play down what many would call the weird aspects of the Christian faith. Namely, the incarnation of Christ, his death, his resurrection.

[14 : 42] To many folk out there, they just sound odd. Could you really believe that? There can be deep embarrassment about these things. But, he said, a failure to believe and proclaim these basic tenets of the Christian faith, it puts you outside the orthodox camp of Christianity.

If you don't hold to the death and resurrection of Jesus, you can't really claim to be a Christian at all, can you? And so, his encouragement to Christians is preach the weird stuff.

And we must. We must preach Christ crucified and risen and ascended. We must proclaim what Paul proclaimed.

It's easy. It's so tempting to leave out these uncomfortable truths about sin and forgiveness and speak instead of a man-centered gospel in which Christ simply exists to make us happy and meet our needs.

It's the kind of thing you get on Thought for the Day on Radio 4. Nothing offensive about that. What is the content of the message we proclaim? But also, how are we proclaiming it?

[15:57] We see here that Paul, for several weeks, reasoned and explained and proved from the Scriptures that these things had to be so. And so, there may be times we have to do that.

We do have to reason and proclaim and persuade and show from the Scriptures why these things are so. We ought to have an answer for the hope that we have.

It can be a challenge, can't it? But do make use of the resources we have to learn so that we do have an answer. Well, there's something of the pattern of proclamation.

There's the message Paul proclaimed. And it's a deeply divisive message. How could it be anything else? This isn't lightweight opinion on some trivial matter.

What Paul's talking about here is the very essence of our existence. It has to do with the purpose of humanity, indeed, the whole cosmos. Thus, the essence of the gospel, it is going to divide.

[16:59] The gospel makes truth claims, ultimate truth claims. And therefore, it divides. It did in the first century and it still does today. For some, the gospel persuades.

But for others, it provokes. And it provokes a hostile reaction. And we see both of those responses here in this section. So let's look first at the proclamation that persuades.

We see this in verse 4. And again, in verses 11 to 13, as Paul goes to Berea. So for some, the gospel persuades. There in verse 4.

Even in Thessalonica, where there was going to be severe opposition. We'll read that in a few moments. Even in Thessalonica. There is glad acceptance. Verse 4.

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. We're seeing here the gospel reaching a number of Jews and a great number of Gentiles too.

[18:04] They were persuaded. And they joined. Persuaded. They came to see and understand that what Paul was saying was indeed true. It wasn't blind faith, was it?

Paul was there opening up the scriptures, showing them from the scriptures these things were true. And so they looked. They were persuaded. And they joined. They joined Paul and Silas.

They weren't solitary. The Christian life is not intended to be solitary, is it? But rather one of joining to each other. And the product here in Thessalonica, the product of gospel proclamation is persuasion of the truth and adjoining.

An affiliation with other believers. However, that's not all. That's not the only result of Paul's preaching there in Thessalonica. There's persuasion, but also provocation.

Many are provoked in opposition. And we'll think about that in a moment. But before we do, just note the reception to the very same gospel proclamation in Berea.

[19:09] Look on to verses 11 and 13. We'll see in a moment that Paul is forced out of Thessalonica and onto Berea. And Luke makes clear the total contrast between these two cities in terms of their reception to the gospel.

So look down there from verse 10. Paul's been forced out of Thessalonica. And when they arrived in Berea, 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 the men.

These Jews, these folk in Berea, they were eager to hear what Paul had to say. They were more noble.

In other words, they had a generous, open-hearted attitude that characterizes noble men. An attitude free from prejudice, prepared to give something a fair hearing.

[20:15] But they didn't give Paul a free pass, did they? They didn't just take his word at face value. No, they examined the scriptures every day. They looked into what Paul was saying to see if it was actually true.

Is this really what the scriptures are saying, Paul? Is that really the case? And so they examined them. Now, clearly not all in Berea believed.

But there was no violence, no hostility, only a readiness to accept that Paul sincerely believed the message he preached. He saw it as God's own non-negotiable truth.

And they were willing to listen. Genuinely consider what he said and not reject it out of hand. So refreshing, isn't it? That sort of attitude, so rare, particularly in our society.

There is a real eagerness to demonize opponents. A real unwillingness to give people a fair hearing. To be open to real debate. Not just when it comes to faith matters and Christianity, but anything.

[21 : 22] Politics, sexuality, gender, whatever it is. There's an eagerness to demonize. Just look at the state of public discourse in our nation at this time.

It's not healthy, is it? It's interesting to hear, just the other week, Barack Obama calling out the eagerness of the woke generation to demonize those who disagree with them.

That refusal to engage, that willingness to de-platform. I don't like what you say. You can't speak. Interesting to hear him call that out. And there will always be those who, when they hear the gospel being proclaimed, they will hold it at arm's length.

They'll label it dangerous and refuse to seriously engage. There will be people like that. It was the case in first century Thessalonica. And it remains so today.

But, there will also be those who are willing to seriously engage. Who will examine the scriptures. Who will engage with eagerness.

[22 : 26] They will give it a fair hearing. I was chatting just this last week to Carl Porter. He works for the Word One-to-One.

He's the Mark Campbell of London. They even look a little bit alike. They managed to convince one of our apprentices they were brothers. And Carl, he put it this way. They both have an aggressive center passing.

I thought that was a quite nice way to put it. Anyway, Carl was telling me about the explosion of what he might call dialogue dinners in London. Particularly the city center workers there in London. And if you're a student, you might be familiar with the idea of a dialogue dinner. But the basic idea is this. You invite a bunch of friends, neighbors, or colleagues for dinner. And as part of the invite, you say something like this.

As you know, I'm a Christian. I'd love to be able to tell you a bit about my own faith. Just for five or ten minutes over dinner. And then you'll have the chance to ask me any question you like. About what I've said.

[23 : 26] About Christianity. Any questions allowed. And Carl was saying that the response has been incredible. I think over a two-week period, there are dozens and dozens and dozens of these dinners happening around the city.

And those Christians who put out those invites, they discover that not only are folk willing to come, but they are keen to engage. They are open to really ask more. Isn't that encouraging?

I found that encouraging. People are willing to come and hear what you have to say. To ask. To question. Now we can sometimes expect that the response that we get to gospel invitations is always going to be negative.

But that is not the case. We will, as we throw open invitations, we will find Bereans out there. People like this who are eager to engage.

Who are willing to be open-minded and give the gospel a fair hearing. What did the Lord Jesus say? The harvest is plentiful.

[24 : 27] But the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. So as you and I go out into our spheres of influence, there will be people like this.

There will be Bereans, folk who are eager and willing to give it a hearing. The harvest is plentiful. And when these folk here in Berea, when they heard Paul, verse 12, many of them therefore believed.

They found Paul's teaching to be in accord with the word of God. They believed the gospel. And that is just what an unprejudiced reading of the scriptures ought to bring men to. An unprejudiced reading ought to lead to salvation.

Saving faith in Jesus. When the gospel is given a fair hearing by reasonable men, it gains the ascent of their minds and hearts. It's prejudice and unreasonableness and opposition that leads men to reject the gospel.

And it's that rejection that we see in the second response. Yes, there's persuasion. There's acceptance. But there's also provocation.

[25 : 43] It's our final point. Verses 5 to 9 and 13 to 15. Proclamation that provokes. Now, why are these paragraphs here in our Bible? Well, it may perhaps surprise us that an episode such like this, this great opposition and harsh treatment is included in Luke's account at all.

Surely, he might want to make the expansion of the gospel to seem seamless and without opposition. If I was writing an account, I'd probably do that. I'd just leave this out.

Let's talk about the positive stuff. But he doesn't do that. Why does Luke include these verses? One of the key reasons is to reveal the reality of the impact of faithful gospel preaching.

Things have been going rather well in Thessalonica so far. Paul's been busy in the synagogue. Jews and Gentiles are being transformed from lives of darkness to light. They're trusting in the Lord Jesus. But, verse 5, starts with a rather startling but.

But the Jews were jealous. And taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar. They go and attack the house where Paul's been staying with a chap called Jason.

[27 : 02] Why did they oppose Paul and Silas so strongly? Well, our text tells us they were jealous. Something we've seen before in Acts. Back in chapter 13 in Antioch, the Jews saw the crowds around Paul and they were filled with jealousy.

They began to contradict what he was saying. They reviled him. And the Jews in Antioch and again here in Thessalonica, they're jealous of the success of Paul's ministry. They're seeing people turning.

They feel threatened and sense they might be losing power and influence. It's really quite petty. It reveals their deep insecurities, doesn't it? So there's jealousy.

But also, what we considered a few moments ago, that the content of Paul's message, the necessity of the cross itself, that in itself would have been deeply offensive to these Jews. They couldn't hack, being told they couldn't earn their forgiveness.

That their sin resulted in Jesus' death on the cross. These would have been deeply offensive to those Jews. And they're deeply offensive today. Also note the extent and the strength of the opposition.

[28 : 08] They form a rabble. They raise an uproar in the city. They head for Jason's house. And it seems Paul wasn't in. So they take the next best thing. They take Jason, his companions.

And they drag them before the city authorities. They bring spurious charges against them. Trumped up. Remember, the real reason for their opposition is jealousy.

But what do they say to the authorities? Well, these guys are being defiant. They're not following Caesar's decrees. There's a big, unruly crowd, whipped up by the Jews, bringing men innocent of the charges brought against them.

They bring to the city authorities who placate the crowd, even though there's little evidence against them. It's reminiscent, isn't it, of another trial scene where an innocent man is unfairly charged with crimes he didn't commit in the presence of an unruly crowd, whipped up by the Jewish authorities. And for the Christians in Thessalonica, the similarities with the opposition that Jesus faced are uncanny. Listen to the charge made against Jesus, recorded in Luke 23.

[29 : 20] We found this man, speaking about Jesus, we found him misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar and saying that he himself is Christ, the king.

Starting similarities to verse 7 here. These Thessalonian believers, Paul and Silas, they are facing similar opposition to what Jesus faced.

As Christians, we are called by Christ himself to take up our crosses daily and follow him.

Opposition and gospel proclamation are never too far apart.

And we're to be prepared to face such opposition ourselves for being a Christian, for following Christ. And the opposition here is unfair, isn't it?

It's ungrounded in anything of any substance. The Jews were jealous. They created an uproar. They brought false allegations. And we too should not be surprised if we're faced with similar unfairness and jealousy and false allegations.

[30 : 26] And the length to which these Jews were willing to go is startling, isn't it? Paul and Silas flee from Thessalonica. They go to Berea, 45 miles away.

I look down at verse 13 where we pick up the story. 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.

Such was the opposition there from these Jews in Thessalonica. Such was the opposition to the message he proclaimed. They were willing to travel 50 miles down the road by foot to go and oppose him there.

See, often those who oppose the gospel will go to extraordinary lengths to make that opposition known and felt. We've seen that with the church.

We know in Scotland who are seeking to build a new building. They want to build a new church, building the heart of the community. But they are facing unbelievable opposition. Fierce, unpleasant, totally ungrounded.

[31 : 32] The opponents are going to extraordinary lengths to quash that building. They don't want it. It's just what we see here in Thessalonica with these Jews. Not satisfied with driving them out of Thessalonica, they go to Berea too.

They want them out of there as well. So we see belief, but also opposition. Persuasion, but also provocation.

These were the products, these were the results of Paul's gospel ministry in Thessalonica. Now this revelation is not new, is it?

We've seen it again and again in the book of Acts. And there can be, I think, a temptation to focus exclusively, at least largely, on the negative aspects, to focus only on the opposition it provokes. And of course, we mustn't ignore that reality. We do need to be realistic about the opposition we will face as the gospel is proclaimed. It's all over the New Testament.

[32 : 36] But let's not miss the fact that the gospel persuades. We see that so clearly here in chapter 17. The gospel persuades a lot of people here. In Thessalonica, we read about some of the Jews being persuaded, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women.

In Berea, many of them believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing, and some men as well. Well, lives were transformed for all eternity by the gospel in these cities.

And the gospel does that. We're to expect it. The gospel does persuade. Lives are transformed. And as we set forth the basic facts of the gospel, Jesus' death, his resurrection, as we do that, as we gently seek to reason with people, explain, prove that this was necessary, as we do that, lives will be transformed for all eternity.

That's what we see here in chapter 17 of Acts. Yes, the gospel provokes, but it also persuades. Lives transformed for all eternity through the gospel.

So don't move. Don't move from Paul's gospel. It's the only gospel. And we may have the great joy of seeing people persuaded. So let's pray to that end, shall we?

[34 : 12] Father God, we do thank you for the gospel.

We thank you that your gospel is powerful to save. And so would you help us to know that, to believe that.

help us to proclaim the unchanged gospel because we know that it will go to the ends of the earth. nothing can stop the spread of your gospel.

Nothing can stop the building of your church. And so help us to be a people that live by faith, not by sight. How often we do that. How often we're fearful because of what we see.

But please help us to be a people of faith together, proclaiming Christ to the ends of the earth. we ask it for the glory of your name.

[35 : 17] Amen.