

27. The Gospel that Multiplies as it Divides

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Date: 04 October 2009

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[0 : 0 0] Page 926 in the Visitor's Bibles, which teaches us all about the Gospel that multiplies even as it divides.

One of the most difficult things that new Christians have to come to terms with is the fact that not everyone meets their newfound faith with enthusiasm.

They're full of joy and excitement. They find new life in Jesus Christ. They find the meaning of life. They find forgiveness and peace. And naturally they want to share their faith and they're zealous with it.

It's a mark of real conversion, isn't it? Somebody who wants to share that new faith with others. But what they find is that often their news is met with a very mixed reaction.

Some people certainly are interested. They share their enthusiasm. But others are not just indifferent. In fact, they are very hostile. Why this division? Why this contrast in the same message?

[1 : 1 1] It's easy for somebody who's a new Christian like that to feel deflated, to feel very discouraged, perhaps to begin to doubt. Well, maybe I'm not explaining this Gospel properly. Perhaps I'm doing something wrong.

It can be very perplexing and quite dispiriting. Sometimes it's very similar in Christian ministry of all different kinds. Sometimes there's a great encouragement early on in a new ministry.

A young preacher perhaps goes to a new charge. And initially there's a very encouraging response. But then before too long, oh dear. Some people begin to take a very strong dislike to this message that they're hearing.

And little groups in the congregation begin to stir up other people. And very soon there's quite a painful division beginning to develop. And it's very, very easily in that situation to feel, well, I must be doing it all wrong.

Maybe I've not got the right approach for this congregation or whatever. And things get really tough sometimes when people leave. And you really feel like giving up.

[2 : 1 6] As though you're getting it all wrong. Well, friends, this passage this morning, in the first part of Acts chapter 17, is here in the Bible and preserved for us so that we will be encouraged, if that's our experience, encouraged to see that actually we're far from necessarily being in the wrong.

Of course it's possible, since we're all fallen human beings, it's possible that we do make stupid decisions, that we do offend people by our own faults and failings. But nevertheless, what Luke makes abundantly clear for us in this passage, in the first half of Acts 17, is that even the finest, most consistent apostolic ministry will attract opposition.

Even the most faithful and gracious evangelism will provoke hostility. And always, therefore, the planting and the building of real biblical churches will be divisive.

You can't build and you can't grow real gospel churches without division. That's the message of Scripture. Because the gospel of Jesus Christ multiplies even as it divides.

Now, our passage today completes the story of Paul's ministry in the province of Macedonia. Last time we saw he was in Philippi. And that was a story of personal stories, wasn't it?

[3 : 41] Of Lydia, of the girl with the spirit, and of the jailer. But now, Paul moves to two other cities of Macedonia, Thessalonica and Berea. And in these stories, we have no individual testimonies.

But what we rather have is the kind of ministry laid out for us that produces those kind of personal stories. In Philippi, if you like, we have the personal testimonies. And here, we have the pattern of testimony that bears that real fruit.

So, verse 1 tells us that Paul and his companions are traveling west along that Via Ignatia, that major Roman highway that connects Byzantium in the east with the Adriatic coast in the west from where you would jump on a ship and get across to Rome via the Via Appia.

Probably, in fact, now that Paul was treading that road in Europe, I would think he already had it in his mind that he was heading right to the end of it and on to Rome. But at any rate, we're told, in verse 1, he passes through Amphipolis and Apollonia and they come to Thessalonica, about 100 miles from Philippi.

It was the capital of the province of Macedonia. In fact, it still is. It's a big seaport, a trade route, quite a cosmopolitan place and so it had at least one Jewish synagogue.

[4 : 59] And verse 2 tells us that as his custom was, Paul went there and on three Sabbaths, probably successively, he ministered there to a mixture of Jews and devout Greeks.

That is Gentiles who hadn't become full Jews but were seeking the truth of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, recognizing them to be the place of truth. So Paul was in Thessalonica for at least three to four weeks.

Maybe, in fact, he was there quite a bit longer. Philippians chapter 4 tells us that at least once the Philippian church sent him money to help his mission there and that when he writes to the Thessalonians later, he reminds us that he worked to keep themselves.

So it may well have been longer but Luke focuses his attention on this period of the synagogue ministry because that was what threw up all the opposition and division which in the end, of course, made him leave Thessalonica and go to Berea.

So Luke is focusing on that. What does he want us to see in the story of these two cities of Thessalonica and Berea? Well, surely it's two things that he makes very, very obvious in his emphasis.

[6 : 08] First, the consistency of Paul's reasoned biblical message and secondly, the contrast in the response that that message provoked.

So let's look then first at what Luke tells us about the consistent reasoning of genuine biblical apostolic evangelism. The apostles proclaimed a consistent message wherever they went and whatever the circumstances.

Look at verse 2 again. As was his custom 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, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, he is the Christ.

What was Paul's method of evangelism? Habitually, it was teaching evangelism. He reasoned with them from the scriptures and no doubt he did that as he says here on the three Sabbath days but also in between I would guess every day.

What does that word mean reasoning from the scriptures? It means he engaged in informed discourse with them. He argued his case. He conversed with them. He discussed.

[7 : 28] It's an intellectual activity. Not an intellectualist activity. Not an elitist thing but intelligent serious discussion about serious matters.

That's what it means. Not emotional outbursts. Not tub-thumping revivalism. Nothing of the kind. It was consistent, reasoned and reasonable speech that took the Bible seriously as a book with a serious message to be engaged with that could be investigated and understood.

Look at the other words Luke uses. They're very precise, aren't they? This reasoning we're told in ESV consisted of explaining and proving. The word explaining, the authorised version, has opening which really is a literal translation of the word.

It's opening up the Bible and unravelling its meaning. Shedding light on what it means so that you can grasp its message. The word actually used back in chapter 16 of Lydia where we're told the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul says.

The word Luke used in the story of the Emmaus Road at the end of Luke 24 where the disciples' eyes were opened when Jesus spoke. Do you remember what they said? Didn't our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road when he opened to us the scriptures?

[8 : 46] And that's what Paul was doing. It was his consistent pattern of evangelism, reasoning, opening up the scriptures, explaining, expounding the message of the Bible and proving.

That word literally means to set something before somebody. You set a meal before somebody so they could tuck into it.

You lay it open before somebody so that they can feed upon it. So Paul reasoned and dialogued intelligently with his hearers. He treated them intelligently.

He opened up the Bible's content, its message and he laid it out for people to let the scriptures speak for themselves to his hearers. In other words, his characteristic and customary evangelistic method was of consistent expository Bible teaching.

It was teaching evangelism. That was Paul's testimony in the synagogue. It's important that we note that. Sometimes we talk about somebody giving their testimony and usually we mean by that they're giving their subjective story.

[9 : 59] But that wasn't at all what Paul was doing. It wasn't subjective, it was objective. It was facts about Jesus. It was the biblical gospel.

The teaching wasn't about himself, it was about Jesus and about the scriptures. And by the way, not just a bunch of old proof texts, not just any simplistic or hackneyed formula, intelligent, opening up the Bible, laying out a coherent and consistent message, the message about salvation.

That was the method of Paul's evangelism. And what was the message that his method conveyed? Well, Luke, of course, has already recorded several times the content of Paul's teaching, so he just sums it up here in just a few words.

Look at verse 3. Two inseparable things he proclaimed. He proclaimed first the Christ of the scriptures, explaining and proving it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead.

He proclaimed, in other words, the whole message of salvation from the Old Testament. And secondly, he proclaimed not just the Christ of the scriptures, but the Jesus of history. This Jesus whom I proclaim to you, he is the Christ.

[11 : 14] He is the one in whom all the promises of the scriptures are fulfilled in a verifiable historical figure. That is, Paul's message was the gospel of promised salvation, the hope of all the Old Testament scriptures, fulfilled in the historic person of Jesus Christ, who was the testimony of the New Testament apostles.

In other words, his testimony was the whole biblical gospel, Old Testament and New Testament. One salvation and one savior. Now again, notice the emphasis on the reasoned opening up of the scriptures as having one consistent message about salvation.

Paul was intent to show that the Christ, the promised Jewish Messiah, must suffer. Now all Jews knew that the Messiah would come, the great son of David, to be the king, to rule, to reign forever.

But what they balked at was any idea of a suffering Messiah. How could that possibly be? How could the great king who would rule from shore to shore possibly be one who would suffer, far less one who would die?

That's a very plain message in the scriptures. It seems hard to us to understand how they couldn't get it. Not just the clear and plain, specific prophecies like Isaiah 53 about the servant who would suffer for his people, but the whole message of the Old Testament.

[12 : 43] Think of the law itself, the law of Moses, with all its insistence on the perpetual suffering and death of these animals for sacrifice for the sins of people. Why couldn't they see that real salvation must mean dealing with sin?

And that sin is such a vast thing, such a huge thing, such an offence against God's justice and his holiness, that surely such a terrible price would have to be paid if ever sin was going to be dealt with.

If ever the real cleansing that these sacrifices pointed to were ever going to be achieved, why couldn't they see that? Of course, it's easy, isn't it, to criticize the Jews and say they ought to have seen that, but their fault is just simply the fault of all people, even very religious people.

Because all people, just like the Jews, totally underestimate the seriousness of sin, the heinousness of sin before a holy God. All religions, all human conceptions of religion vastly downplay sin.

They make sin something that's manageable, something you can deal with through religion and therefore something you can deal with ultimately by yourself, through religious devotions, through works of piety, through penances or vows or sacrifices, whatever it is.

[14 : 06] Something that you can do and then feel assured that, well, now I've done this, surely God must accept me for what I am and what I've done so I can feel good about myself.

That's what religion is designed to do, make us feel good about ourselves. But you see, if the message of the Bible tells you, no, real salvation, real forgiveness is utterly beyond all human endeavor and all human religion, if it tells you that sin is such a matter of cosmic proportions that only, only the sacrificial death of God himself in the person of his Son, only that can ever begin to put matters right, to atone for sin, to put you right with God, well then, that leaves you very, very helpless and humble.

You're forced to admit that even your very, very best is not good enough. And that's very hard, isn't it, for human pride to stomach. That doesn't make us feel good about ourselves, not at all.

You see, the Jews did simply what we so often do. They painted themselves as victims instead of the perpetrators of sin. They wanted their Savior King, they wanted the Messiah, but they wanted him to come and save them from their oppressors, from the Romans, from economic oppression, from political oppression.

They wanted social freedom, religious freedom. They wanted psychological freedom. They wanted to feel good about themselves and free. We're the victims, God.

[15 : 47] Come and save us. Life has dealt us such a dreadful blow. It's made it so hard. It's not our fault. It's the world's fault. It's society's fault. Come and save us. We want justice, but we're the ones who are sinned against.

Come and make us feel good about ourselves again. You see, the Bible's gospel is the absolute opposite of that. The Bible's gospel says, no, it's me who sinned against, says God.

And the Christ, my holy son, must suffer because of you. You're the criminals. You see, the apostolic gospel taught that the Christ must suffer because of the sin of man against the holy God.

and that universal sin was the problem in the human heart, including the Jews, even the most religious of them. And therefore, the unique Savior promised in the Scripture was the only possible answer.

I pass on to you that which I received as of first importance, says Paul to the Corinthians, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. And that was a very threatening message.

[17 : 04] A very desperately undermining message for Jews then and for every human person since. It's a devastating blow to all religious pride, to all human pride.

In fact, it's quite scandalous. But that was the consistent reasoning of biblical evangelism. Well, what did it lead to? We've heard the consistent reasoning of Paul's Gospel.

The rest of the passage homes in on the contrasting reaction that we find to that apostolic biblical evangelism. Verse 4 tells us some of the Jews in Thessalonica were persuaded, as well as a great many Greeks, both men and women.

Some also were told from the aristocracy. Note that terminology, by the way, persuaded. Not hoodwinked, not brainwashed, but persuaded in their minds of the coherence of the Gospel message.

And that's always the aim of true evangelism. So the first reaction we read about is reasoned persuasion. And it led them to joining Paul and Silas.

[18 : 09] And as a result of that, the church in Thessalonica was born. And we can read the letters to it later on in the New Testament. A response that began in the mind, persuasion, but let's be clear that it led to far more than just a mere change of mind.

No, the message came home to them with great power. It transformed their lives forever. Our Gospel, says Paul later, came to you not only in word, but also in the power of God and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

See, the Gospel is a reasonable word to the mind, but it's also a word of power to transform the heart and the conscience, to bring people into a wholly new existence. The majority of them who believed were told were the Greeks.

They'd formerly been pagans, idolaters. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 1 about their change in life. He says, they turned from idols.

Their past was all gone. They now served the living and true God, he said. Their whole present life was totally different as well. And they were living, he says, waiting for the coming of the Lord Jesus who saves us from the wrath to come.

[19 : 22] Their future hope was all secure. Life changing. Past, present and future. Quite remarkable. And that's the first reaction we're told about the church in Thessalonica.

The reasoned persuasion of true faith that changed lives forever. And you'd have thought, wouldn't you, that the majority of the Jews would have been thrilled at this message of the fulfillment of all that their scriptures had promised.

And you'd have thought that they'd be even more thrilled that all these former pagans were turning from idolatry and finding the worship of the one true and living God. But verse 5 is a shock, isn't it?

But no. The Jews were jealous. Not joyous. Just as they were in Antioch, remember, in Acts chapter 13.

The very people who ought to respond instead of reasoned persuasion, they meet the message with quite the opposite. Riotous prejudice, quite literally. Verse 5, they gather some of the low life of the city, a wicked rabble, they form a mob, they start a riot.

[20 : 34] They attack Jason's house. He must have been one of the believers who had identified with Paul and Silas and opened his house to them. So they attack his house. They can't find Paul and Silas there, so instead they want to bring out Jason and the others to the crowd.

And then they escalate the situation. They bring it to law before the city magistrates. High irony, isn't it? Here's Paul reasoning politely from the Bible and here's his opponents starting a riot.

No concern for truth at all, just wanting blood. And they're the ones accusing their apostles of turning the world upside down, of causing trouble everywhere. They're the ones who are saying these men are revolutionaries.

They're starting a riot against Caesar. That's hardly the response, is it, of reasonable and honest people. The fact is that they had no adequate response to the clarity and sanity of the biblical gospel and therefore their only response was to resort to violence, to riotous prejudice, quite literally.

Why did they do that? Well, not because they didn't understand the message that Paul was proclaiming.

[21 : 46] In fact, it was because they did. They understood, fine, says verse 7, that he was proclaiming a king, King Jesus, before whom every knee must bow, in whom alone everyone must find salvation.

He proclaimed the risen Lord, the enthroned Son of God, of Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, of all the prophetic words that we've seen him preach about before. And you see, that is a terrible threat to human pride and autonomy.

Because if Jesus is king, then he's king of your life, like it or not. And you must bow the knee to him, to him alone. And you must repent.

And you must live your life in obedience to his word, not in obedience to your own inclinations of your heart. That's a huge threat to our autonomy as human beings, to our cherished ways of life that we don't want to lose, to the comfortable world that we don't want to change.

So they say, we're not interested in a reasoned case about the truth. We just want this teaching silenced immediately. We don't want to hear it anymore. So they start a riot. But, of course, that's just what happens still today, isn't it, all the time.

[23 : 02] People don't like the true biblical gospel. They're offended by it. And people do today just the same things as they did then. They expose people who do stand for the biblical gospel to the court of public opinion, just as they did to Jason and the others there.

Brought them out before the crowd, the demos, the people, the court of public opinion. That's what happens today. No one believes in your Christian morality anymore about the things you teach about marriage or about sex or about protecting innocent life of the unborn or the aged.

So don't you dare foist that kind of stuff on us. We're not having that in our society. Or they say, it's offensive in our modern world for you to dare to say that there's only one way to God through one person, Jesus Christ.

Don't dare to say that sort of thing in our multicultural world. You're a bunch of bigoted fundamentalists. And it's still the same if you don't get the result you want opposing the gospel that way, then you do what they did in Thessalonica.

You turn to the law and to the magistrates and you try to pass laws that will silence Christians for saying in public anything about the uniqueness of Christ or the demands of scripture. And you pass laws and you call it giving people religious freedom.

[24 : 29] And you even lock up sometimes and you charge Christian people who dare simply to say in their own hotel when they're talking to guests, this happened just the other week, that you believe Jesus is the only way to God.

And you lock them up and you say they're giving offence to other religions. That happened in this country just a couple of weeks ago. 21st century Britain is just the same as 1st century Thessalonica.

In some countries it is literally the mob violence that we saw there. We heard, didn't we, just the other week one of our prayer partners in Pakistan, their village being invaded and their church burnt down.

Not quite that yet in this country but we have the polite riotous prejudice of the new atheists, of the Richard Dawkinses and the Christopher Hitchens who are desperate to protect our society from this danger that the Christians preach.

Danger of what? The danger of reasoned, polite, biblical explanation. Yes, that's so dangerous we must ban it from our schools.

[25 : 37] We must not allow these things to take place on university campuses lest thinking people be beguiled. And we must even seek to prosecute and arrest those who dare to stand out in the street speaking these things or giving out Bibles to people.

And we see the same very strange religious alliances, don't we? Of the established religion along with the secular state to silence the gospel of Jesus.

Here's the Jews rushing to the defense of Caesar. And standing against Jesus, the true king and lord of their church.

High irony, isn't it? Just as they shouted at Jesus' trial, didn't they? We have no king but Caesar. Such is the threat, you see, of a gospel that proclaims Jesus as king of our lives and demands real repentance and faith that it stirs up riotous prejudice even uniting sworn enemies against the true gospel and those who stand for it.

So once again the missionaries are run out of town. Jason is bound over no doubt with a large sum to keep the peace to make sure they don't come back and they have to leave town.

[26 : 59] Happily, verse 10, when they go to Berea they find a much better reception. Verse 11 says the Jews of that place were more noble in their disposition. That is, they were, as the dictionary says, well-bred persons.

They were noble-minded or open-minded. Not closed-minded. Not bigoted like the majority of those were in Thessalonica. They were open to reasoned persuasion.

And so verse 11 says they received the word with all eagerness. They weren't gullible, notice. They weren't being stupid. They weren't having this wool pulled over their eyes.

Of course not. What were we told? They examined the scriptures daily to see if what they were being told was actually true. And because they did examine the Bible and saw that it really did say these things and it really did make perfect sense, they saw that the message was coherent.

They saw that it explained the world that they live in, that they knew and experienced. They saw that its message touched their hearts deepest needs in its declaration of salvation from sin through Jesus.

[28 : 08] And so verse 12, many of them therefore believe. Many Jews and also many Greeks, again, both men and women. But, there's always a but, isn't there, verse 13, so prejudiced and so perverse are those who oppose the gospel, so outraged are they that the gospel does have a clear and consistent reasonable power to change people's minds and hearts.

So furious are they that the truth can't help but win people over when they're open-minded and intelligent and inquire. They'll stop at nothing to suppress such a dangerous message.

So they rush 50 miles between Thessalonica and Berea to bring their same riotous prejudice to bear in that place as well. stirring up the crowd, stirring up the public against them. I can't help thinking about Richard Dawkins and his friends.

He constantly refuses to debate publicly with Christian apologists the truth of the gospel because usually they wipe the floor with him. But constantly he's using the media and every cause possible to stir up prejudice against Christians and Christian belief, trying to ban any Christian infants from schools, from broadcasting, from the whole public arena.

But you see, if you're here this morning and you're an atheist or an agnostic, and I'm sure there will be some of you this morning who are in that position, well, you've got to judge for yourself, haven't you, which is the more honest and scientific approach to encourage the attitude of open-minded exploration of the facts and the message of Scripture like the Bereans did, or to take the way of the mob violence of the Thessalonians.

[30 : 01] Which is the more honest? Is it reasoned persuasion or is it riotous prejudice? By the way, if you are open-minded, if you are a noble-minded sort of person and you're an agnostic or an atheist, why not do the Berean thing?

Why not come along on Thursday to Christianity Explored? Examine for yourselves whether these things that we're saying are true. There'll be no coercion, no emotionalism, no pulling the wool over your eyes, just laying forth the truth in front of you.

It's up to you. If you're an open-minded person, you'll be very, very welcome indeed. Well, the apostles proclaimed one message, regardless of when or where, the consistent reasoning of real biblical evangelism.

And yet always, it provoked these two responses. The contrasting reaction that you always find to all real biblical evangelism. What does all of that have to say to us as Christians today?

Well, I think it tells us that we need to have clear resolve to stick to real biblical evangelism. Resolve not to be discouraged at apparent failure.

[31 : 13] Resolve that we expect contrasting reactions wherever the gospel's proclaimed, even among those ostensibly proclaiming to be God's people. And that we should expect to find even vehement opposition wherever the gospel is at work in wonderful ways, bringing people into new life, discovering the joy that's in Jesus as the Bible unfolds its truth about him.

Always, where the gospel is really multiplying, it will also be dividing. And sometimes that division may seem to overwhelm and dwarf the multiplying of the gospel.

Often it may well be that the majority seem to be prejudiced as they were in Thessalonica. Yet in the midst, nevertheless, a church was born and rooted in that place.

But sometimes the word is eagerly lapped up like it was in Berea. Even there, though, opposition will come. Wherever some receive the word eagerly, others will be resenting that word enviously, even traveling miles if necessary, to oppose it.

And Luke's saying to us, friends, you need to expect that and not be floored by it in your Christian witness. It'll be especially so where the true liberty of the gospel of grace is a threat to vested interests, including religious vested interests.

[32 : 44] See, the Jews in Thessalonica were jealous. They resented losing their influence over these Gentile seekers. Maybe especially they resented losing these leading men and women who probably funded their synagogue.

Well, all religious power brokers hate it when the true gospel liberates people from their control. Think of the persecution of the early reformers. Men like Jan Hus or William Tyndale or Wycliffe who put the liberating truth of God's word directly into people's hands.

That meant people could find access to God and truth and life without the intercession of a special class of priests and clergy, the ecclesiastics. They were robbed of their powers.

They hated it. The religious establishment is always terrified to lose any grip on its own funds. The very thought that Christian people might use their own minds to direct their own money to true gospel work instead of giving it to their ecclesiastical coffers is enough to give them a heart attack.

Now Church of Scotland today is petrified isn't it of losing its influence as a national church and therefore it will always oppose with great prejudice people that they call troublemakers who rock the boat with a living message of biblical truth.

[34 : 05] I came across this week again a very pertinent comment written by James Denny one of the great Scottish theologians of the past. About a hundred years ago he wrote this. the comment on the Sadducees who opposed Jesus' ministry called the Leaven of the Sadducees listen to what he says could have been written for the Jews of Thessalonica.

Religion for the Sadducees was an institution not an inspiration. It was part of an established system of social order with which all their worldly interests were bound up and their one concern was to maintain the existing equilibrium.

Living religion the Sadducees dreaded. A religious movement perturbed them. A religion that grew that operated as a creative or recreative power that initiated new movements in the soul or society such a religion the Sadducees could only see as an enemy.

Their energies were absorbed in keeping up the social equilibrium which was so advantageous to them. This attitude to the Christian faith says Denny this particular working of the Sadducean leaven is not confined to ancient times.

It is the peril in the first instance of an established clergy with vested interests in things as they are. Well we're part of an established church and Dr. Denny's words are an apt warning for all of us aren't they in the Church of Scotland today.

[35 : 32] Beware he says the leaven of the Sadducees the prejudiced envy of dead religion against the living truth of the truly biblical gospel.

We've got to be realists friends you see wherever there is a movement of real grace and power in the gospel there will be prejudice and great jealousy from those who would walk 50 yards to share the gospel but will travel 50 miles to shut up the gospel.

Be realists says Luke expect it. But I want to finish with a word of great encouragement as well as challenge.

A real encouragement to us as gospel people and it's this our faith is true and it's reasonable and we are open minded fair minded people like the Bereans examine the scripture and evaluate the message that we proclaim there will be many many men and women young and old Jew and Gentile who will receive the truth and will join the church of Jesus Christ.

That's why I'm a Christian and most of us here are Christians. Not that we've never thought to question things that we were brought up with. I'm not an idiot I've lived in the world I've observed the world like many of you I've learned arts and sciences I've worked myself personally in different spheres as well as being a pastor and I know that only the Christian gospel makes any sense of the world as I see it and as I know it to be.

[37 : 11] A world of beauty on the one hand and dreadful bestiality on the other. A world of man's achievement and glory and yet also man's failure and shame. A world that's full of joy and fulfillment and yet a world that's also full of sorrow and loss.

Only the Bible can explain the world as it really is. The gospel, friends, is true. It's verifiable. It's consistent. It's coherent.

And that means we can have confidence in proclaiming it wherever we are to whomsoever we're speaking. We don't ever have to resort to trickery to dodgy methods to try and win converts.

Not ever. There are, alas, always charlatans at work in Christ's name. But they do nothing but bring shame to the true gospel of Christ.

I remember not long ago watching a TV documentary of somebody following around a health and healing roadshow around the United States cynically commenting on it. And he was absolutely right.

[38 : 11] Every day the same wheelchairs went in, the same people supposedly got healed, the same people came out in the same wheelchairs and went in again the next day. An absolute sham.

But that is not genuine biblical evangelism. It's just a sham that often is for greed and for gain. What did Paul say in his letter to the Thessalonians?

Our appeal does not spring from error or impure motive or any attempt to deceive. We never came, he said, with words of flattery as you know, nor with a pretext for greed, nor did we seek glory from people.

Of course not. Because he knew that the truth of God can stand up for itself. And so we can have confidence in the consistent reasoning of real biblical evangelism.

Knowing that it will produce always that contrasting reaction but that even as it does divide as the gospel always will so also it will be multiplying the kingdom of God.

[39 : 14] There will be Bereans everywhere, friends, who will eagerly receive the word of life. So be encouraged and have confidence. Go on laying out the gospel.

We echo Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 where he says, Therefore having this ministry by the word of God, we do not lose heart but we have renounced disgraceful underhand ways.

We refuse to practice cunning or tamper with God's word but by open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. That's what we do.

Open statement of the truth on Sundays, on Wednesdays and Christianity explored in your office or in your classroom. And good-hearted, open-minded people will come to see that the message of Jesus is the truth that leads to salvation.

That's a great encouragement for every one of us here this morning who's a Christian believer. But it is also a challenge, isn't it? It's a warning because if you've not accepted the truth of the gospel of Jesus and according to the Bible it's not because you're too intelligent, it's not because you're too reasoned or open-minded, it's because you're hostile to the gospel with its truthful explanation of the world and with its powerful summons to repent and by the need of Jesus.

[40 : 49] And it means that you're aligning yourself not with the reasoned persuasion of open-minded honesty but with the irrational prejudice of those who hate the truth and therefore who won't examine it but just want to suppress it.

You're aligning yourself with the closed-minded bigotry of those who won't even engage with God's truth at all. Surely you don't want to be that kind of person do you?

Why would you? There's absolutely nothing whatsoever to gain but there's absolutely everything in the world to lose. Don't be like those people who met the gospel with riotous prejudice.

Be like the Bereans. Be noble. Be open-minded. No one's going to try and con you. How could they? Not if you yourself examine the Bible daily to see if the things you're being told really do add up and make sense and are true.

So if that's you maybe God brought you into this building this morning just to hear that challenge. To examine for yourself whether all this that we've been talking about really is true.

[42 : 02] And maybe you want to think about that for the rest of this week. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that your word is truth and it is life. And we pray that you would give us the open minds and the open hearts to examine it and to find in it the truth for our lives also.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.