

## Acts 17:1-9

Intro: April 15, 2007 A Sound Gospel for an Insane World

All too often common sense is uncommon. Sound reason is lacking. Thinking is a lost art.

Ray Poore called his wife, saying that their dog bit him and he was going to kill it. She raced back to their mobile home in Winchester, VA to find Ray dead. It appears that Ray decided to beat his dog with his shotgun by holding the barrel of a loaded gun. Ray's mother, commenting on her son's cruel and stupid actions commented only as a mother could: "Ray was a very intelligent man, but he didn't always use his intelligence in the right way." ...Like, say, to think.<sup>1</sup>

Not much different than three teens who allegedly stole gas from a sawmill's fuel shed. They also allegedly burned the place down. Police said that at 2.30am the trio entered the Mungallala Sawmill and used a lighter to see how much fuel they had taken from a storage shed. The resultant blaze destroyed the fuel shed, sawmill and sawmill equipment and injured one of the teenagers. The three are scheduled to appear court on April 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>2</sup>

Our world is full of people who thrive on stupidity, as though the fuel which drives them is high octane idiocy. While we chuckle at the ignorance around us, some level the same accusing finger in our direction when it comes to the reasonableness of our faith. It is not uncommon to hear the allegation that Christians' have a room temperature IQ, A titanic intellect... In a world full of icebergs.

In 1993, *Washington Post* writer Michael Weisskopf issued his notorious declaration that evangelicals are "largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command..." Conservative Protestant intellectuals were quick to call his bluff. Yet only a year later, when historian Mark Noll, himself a conservative Protestant, published a book called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, it was widely greeted by his coreligionists not with cries of "Scoundrel!" and "Traitor!" but the murmur, "Alas, 'tis true."<sup>3</sup>

Our passage this morning reminds us that the gospel we believe is good news that is to be well reasoned, well grounded, but may not always be well received. This morning we begin a new sermon series from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. What is written in this short letter will guide us as we begin a new life here in Delafield. But before we jump into the letter, Acts 17 gives us needed background.

To this point in Acts, Christ has ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit descended on the church and it has expanded from Jerusalem and now out to the west, into modern day Turkey. About 20 years has gone by and the church is reaching both Jews and Gentiles. This is Paul's second missionary foray, this time partnering with Silas. They've traveled through Asia Minor and then turned west and south into Greece. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas left behind a new congregation in Philippi, their backs still bear the scars of their beating, they travel 100 miles to the next major town, Thessalonica. There some are persuaded to believe and others are persuaded to riot. But through the passage we see how the gospel, whether believed or rejected, must focus on the foundational truths of Christ's work on our behalf. READ Acts 17:1-9

Thessalonica was the largest and most populous city in Macedonia, founded by Cassander in 315 B.C. and named after his wife, the sister of Alexander the Great. When Paul arrived, it had a population of 200,000 and was a flourishing commercial center which commanded trade by sea across the Aegean and by land because of the Via Egnatia.

On his arrival in Thessalonica, Paul sought to earn his living by working at his trade of tent-making. We learn this from the apostle's first letter to the Thessalonians, where he says, "For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God..."(1 Thess.2:9).

While he established himself in town, he followed his pattern of connecting with the synagogue to find those who may already have the foundation of Scripture to understand how Jesus is the Messiah promised in God's Word. In v2 Luke describes what took place, focusing more on the approach than the content. It is here we see how the gospel is to be well reasoned.

## THE GOSPEL IS TO BE WELL REASONED

With typical Lucan shorthand, we are given a glimpse not only of the major points of what Paul said, but also how it was presented. Luke's words describe an approach which demonstrates that our faith is to be well reasoned. In verse 2, Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures."

The word here is *dialogo*, from which we get dialogue, means an orderly presentation of truth. This reasoning of v2 is further defined as *explaining and proving* in v3, describing a rhetorical syllogism, a pattern of persuasion familiar to any 1<sup>st</sup> century schoolboy. By deductive logic, Paul propounds major and minor premises guiding the hearers by logic to a necessary conclusion, the speaker's goal in persuasion. The witness pattern is as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- Major Premise: The (Messiah) must suffer and rise from the dead.
- Minor Premise: Jesus modeled these characteristics in his death and resurrection
- Conclusion: *This Jesus . . . is the Christ.*

Paul's letter likewise speaks of his approach. In 2:1-5 there is a single focus of their teaching, not to deceive nor to please their hearers, but to boldly proclaim truth. Paul's preaching illustrates for us that we too must engage the mind.

Preaching is to be intelligent discourse, not entertainment. We come to church not to be amused; but wrestle with truth about God. At times it may be hard to follow a sermon, as it lacks the culture's fluff. There is not the visual stimulation or the emotional titillation. It calls you to think, to wrestle with the veracity of what is proclaimed. This is not an excuse for dry diatribes or sterile sermons. When you listen to a sermon, ask yourself: "Does this cohere with logic? Does it hang together as a whole?" If not, you may easily find yourself duped by emotional pandering.

While we do not reduce the Christian faith to mere logic, we must not demean the mind which God gave us. We are created in the image of God and should use the minds God gave us. It is an enormous tragedy that a wedge has been driven between intellect and faith for ordinary Christians. Christians of all people ought to be rational, to love truth, and to be using their minds to think what God has taught them to think. Yet we very often get branded as irrational, foolish, superstitious, and backward.

Christianity does not demand you check your brains at the door. Faith is not the absence of logic; rather we must challenge the prevailing illogic of our age which seems to dismiss sound thinking that refuses to engage in a dialogue. Logic is not contrary to witness.

But logic alone is not what changes a life. It is neither emotionalism nor intellectualism that transforms a sin stained heart, bound to rebelling against God. Change comes as God the Holy Spirit works through God's Word. For that reason, the gospel is to be well grounded.

## THE GOSPEL IS TO BE WELL GROUNDED

Paul did reason, the terms Luke uses to describe what Paul is doing point to his training in rhetoric, yet the content is vitally important to his approach. It is not just that he used logic, but he reasoned *from the Scriptures*. How? He did this by *explaining and proving* what was necessary.

Again the terms used in verse 3 describe an approach that is logical and coherent. The word to *explain* literally means to open. But what is opened is more than the scroll and words pointed to on the page. With simplicity the Scriptures are taught so that their minds are opened as well.

This same word is used of what Jesus did with the disciples after he rose from the dead (Lk 24:32,45), as he opened the Scriptures to them so that they could understand what they said about him. To open Scriptures is to reveal its primary theme: the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is not just playing word games or finding hidden meanings in the text, as though the Bible is some hidden code unlocked only by the enlightened.

Paul gives evidence, he proves. The word *prove* means to set beside, that is, to put the claims of God's Word next to their fulfillment. What Paul proved was the necessity of the Messiah to suffer, die and be raised from the dead. From there, he makes the connection between what God said he would do for thousands of years and what he did in Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul used an apologetic argument from fulfilled prophecy and miracle to demonstrate the truth of the Christian faith. Jesus was the one of whom the Scriptures spoke, because the events of his life and death, and resurrection are exactly what the Old Testament predicates of the Christ. The very fact that the expectations of the prophets--some of whom are writing as much as 1500 years before the coming of Christ--all come to fruition in the events surrounding the life, death and burial of Jesus Christ is a very powerful and compelling argument. Paul proceeds

"to reason" with those in the Synagogue, by setting out what the prophets said this about the Messiah--and then showing how Jesus fulfilled these expectations. "*This Jesus is the Christ.*"<sup>5</sup>

Preaching is content driven; it communicates facts necessary for people to respond in faith. Preaching the gospel must be grounded in what is said in God's Word.

It is not substituting story-telling for biblical exposition, or using some otherwise unexplained Scripture text as a peg on which to hang a string of illustrations. Still less is it moralizing on social questions or speculating about prophecy from TV news of events in the Middle East. If we are going to see change in our lives, we need to hear of Christ and his claims on our lives.<sup>6</sup>

What is set forth as an example in Acts 17 is the pattern we seek to follow here Sunday by Sunday. Just because our culture is becoming increasingly biblically illiterate is no excuse for us to think that we need to set aside exposition of God's Word.

And our world is becoming increasingly illiterate. Somerfield, a chain of supermarkets in the U.K., decided to lecture shoppers about Easter. "Brits are set to spend a massive 520 million pounds [US\$1.02 billion] on Easter eggs this year," it said in a press release, "but many young don't even know what Easter's all about." It then went on to tell everyone: "the birth of Jesus."

A hasty revision, which made reference to "Britons' mounting ignorance regarding Easter," changed the references to "rebirth" before a third version was released to use the word "resurrection" after it had "consultations" with the Church of England.<sup>7</sup>

The temptation is to soft-pedal the biblical content of the message, on the ground that people will be put off, or at least confused, by material with which they are unfamiliar. But real change comes by God's Word.

If the sermon you hear is unreasoned, demand logic. If it is ungrounded in God's Word ...demand repentance. Since faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God, be sure that the principle subject of every sermon is Jesus and him crucified.

But with that all said should we then be convinced that we have found the magic pill that will make our church grow? No, for it is a myth that lives will be changed merely by the right use of means, even biblical means, for real change comes not by our doing what is right, but in God's sovereign working in the lives of his people.

#### **THE GOSPEL MAY OR MAY NOT BE WELL RECEIVED 4-9**

We've seen from our text that Paul proclaimed Christ in a well reasoned manner being well grounded in Scripture. What happens next dispels any idea that if we have a logical argument flowing from God's Word, people will always respond positively. Some were persuaded of the gospel's claims; others were persuaded that they must rid their city of these miscreants.

In v4 we are told of those who were persuaded. As Paul was proclaiming Christ in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the *them* in v4 are Jews. They *joined*, attached themselves to, threw their lot in, with Paul and Silas. In addition to the Jews, God fearing Greeks and women of note also joined.

Paul refers to this reception in 1 Thessalonians 2:13

But there were others who did not like what they heard. Their response lacked the reasonableness which characterized Paul's presentation. The following verses in his letter describe this aspect.

Why some of the Jews were jealous is not clear. They may have objected to the message itself. Their reasons may be more visceral than intellectual, more of the gut than the mind. Whatever the reason, their recourse was not to further engage Paul in an intellectual repartee.

They aroused the rabble. Whereas the ESV calls them wicked men of the rabble, the KJV calls them "lewd fellows of the baser sort". They are literally *marketplace loafers*.

This term refers to those who had nothing better to do than to hang around the market looking for trouble. They are the soccer hooligans of the first century, the mall rats of Rome. Rambunctious youth at Mayfair is not a new problem.

The mob, thinking Paul was being lodged by a local boy, Jason, they go to his house. As Paul and Silas are not found, perhaps having been warned of the ensuing violence, the mob grabs Jason and hauls him before the crowd. The charges are threefold.

- 1<sup>st</sup> These people have caused trouble all over the world, they have literally turned the world upside down. That is, they stir up sedition, they are political agitators

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Jason is harboring them. They have so infiltrated our city, that one of our own, Jason is protecting these troublemakers
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Finally, and the most dangerous charge, they defy Caesar's decrees.

Their concern is not unfounded.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century there was widespread unrest in the Jewish communities throughout the Empire. Jewish freedom fighters were active in Israel during Claudius' reign (45-54 A.D.). A militant Messianic movement was fermenting among the Jews of the Dispersion, and the custodians of law and order in the imperial provinces and cities were not likely to draw a distinction between it and the gospel of Jesus the Messiah which Paul preached. In Rome itself there had been trouble of this kind already, so much so that Claudius had expelled the Jewish community from the city (Acts 18:2). Roman writer Suetonius relates how there was rioting at the instigation of a certain man he refers to as Chrestus, which may be a misspelling of Christ. The Edict of Claudius in AD 50 may be the decree Luke refers to here. Thus when viewed in this light the charges made by the Jews could be construed to have a grain of truth in them.

The charge that these Christians had another king, Jesus, was the most dangerous.

Jesus was accused before Pilate of sedition, of 'subverting' the nation by claiming himself to be 'Christ, a King', (Lk. 23:2). Paul's teaching about the kingdom of God (14:22) and about Christ's *parousia* (the official term for an imperial visit), which we know from the letters to the Thessalonians he had emphasized when he was with them, were misinterpreted. Since the emperor was sometimes called *basileus* (king), as well as *kaisar* (emperor), why wouldn't the title *basileus* to Jesus (7) be a treasonable offence?

When we confess that Christ's kingdom is not of this world, we are not saying its otherworldliness has nothing to do with our lives, but rather it supercedes and demands our sole allegiance.

The accusation against the early Christians remains, yet it is not we who have turned the world on its head. Rather the fall is what has sent thus Humpty-Dumpty tumbling so that the power of this world's kings will never put it right.

It is not we who make this world topsy-turvy. Rather the insanity of our world needs the gospel to set it aright. The truth that it was necessary for Jesus to suffer in our place, to die for our sins and be raised from the dead, though, does upset our culture's apple cart, it challenges the status quo.

But that change of culture begins here: with the simple proclamation of Christ's work on our behalf. We will turn the world on its head through this simple life changing truth ... that is to be received by faith.

If we are to change the world, it will begin here, among us, in of all places, Wisconsin, as we grapple with the transforming truth that we, that I need a savior and his name is Jesus. That simple confession will change the world as it changes me, it changes us.

We overturn the world when we announce that God is sovereign and we are not, that Christ is king, not our own will. We continue to overthrow the status quo when we explain from God's Word what that means. It means we confess to be insane, irrational and broken people in need of a savior and we worship a king who rescued his subjects.

<sup>1</sup> This is True 1/26/03

<sup>2</sup> [http://stupidcriminalfile.blogspot.com/2007\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://stupidcriminalfile.blogspot.com/2007_03_01_archive.html)

<sup>3</sup> J. Budziszewski *First Things*, 100 p. 52

<sup>4</sup> Larkin, Acts 245-246

<sup>5</sup> K. Riddlebarger, *Men Who Have Caused Trouble all Over the World*

<sup>6</sup> Keddie, Acts 200

<sup>7</sup> This is True 4/8/07