

# Public Truth

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[ 0 : 00 ] We are in a series looking at the book of Acts, and it's been a delightful series as we regather and figure out how to do all of the logistics of being together and dismissing kids and all of those various details. We are also spending time remembering what a church is supposed to be, and there's no better way to do that than to look at the story of the early church.

And we're now in the final section of the book of Acts where we're looking at the apostle Paul who is on trial. Paul is facing various government leaders. He's on trial. He's been accused of all kinds of things by the Jews who are trying to shut him down. And so he's on trial, and we see these kind of confrontations between Paul, who has no power or influence whatsoever, and these powerful government leaders who have all kinds of power, who have the power of life and death over him. And in some ways, this is really a picture of the church in the world, what it feels like to be a Christian in the West, especially for those of us who live in a place like Washington, D.C., people who feel like they have very little cultural influence, and yet we are nevertheless called to have a public faith and to be public witnesses of the truth of Jesus Christ. And so we're looking at Paul through that lens, and this week we're looking at the passage that Evan read a moment ago, Acts chapter 26, verses 19 through 29. This is Paul facing off against King Agrippa and Festus, the local governor. And we're going to see three things about Paul that help shape how we think about what it means to be a church in the 21st century West in Washington, D.C. First of all, Paul's aim. What's he aiming at? What should we be aiming at? Number two, Paul's method. How does Paul actually go about doing what he aims to accomplish? And then third, Paul's bizarre confidence.

How does Paul stand there in chains and maybe rags, surrounded by these powerful leaders, and have such confidence and poise? Where does that come from? Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for its inherent power. We thank you that you're not a dead God. You're not like the idols of the world, deaf and mute and dumb, but you're a living God who speaks. Your word shaped the mountains. Your word filled in the oceans. Your word put the stars in the sky, causes the sun to rise. Lord, your word has the power to work in us as well. Even as you created all things, so we ask now that through your word you would recreate us. We pray this for our good and for your glory in Jesus's name. Amen. So first of all, Paul's aim as he faces off against these leaders.

[ 3 : 07 ] Let me give you a little context. Paul is under house arrest at this point in the story, pending the resolution of his ongoing, never-ending trial. Knowing that he's not likely to get a fair trial where he is, because the Jewish lobby is very powerful and has a lot of influence over the local leaders, Paul has used his privilege as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. He says, I want to go and I want to be tried before Caesar where I'm more likely to get a fair trial. And so he's made this appeal. Festus is the local governor. He needs to do the paperwork to send Paul on to Rome, but the problem is that Festus is new. He's come in to replace Felix. He's not familiar with the area. He's not familiar with the culture. He has no idea what to make of Paul. I mean, to him, this whole thing is very bizarre.

But he hears that King Agrippa is going to be visiting and he knows that King Agrippa's family has lived in the region for generations. Agrippa's very familiar with all of the ins and outs and nuances of this situation with Paul. And so Festus essentially asks Agrippa to consult with him so that he can move Paul on to Rome. And so here we have, in this particular passage, Paul standing in the audience hall before Agrippa and Bernice and it describes all of the great pomp with which they entered. There's all of the city's most prominent leaders are all in this audience hall. And there Paul is standing there in his chains and Paul begins to make his argument. So that's where we are. And Agrippa very quickly realizes that Paul is not just trying to defend himself. His aim is not just to prove his innocence. That's been proven again and again and again. There's more going on here.

And so Agrippa really starts to figure out pretty quickly what Paul's actually going for. And he says in verse 28, are you trying to convert me? That's essentially what he says. He's flabbergasted. Are you trying to get me to become a Christian? And Paul says, no. No, I'm trying to convert all of you. Not just you, O king. Everybody in this room. In fact, everybody who can hear me. Anybody who can hear my words.

[ 5 : 28 ] I wish you would all become like me in every way. Except for the chains. But in every other way. I'm trying to convert everybody in this room. And we have to ask why in this moment, of all moments, is Paul choosing this time to try to convert his hearers. He's on trial. Right? His life is hanging in the balance. And as it says in verse 19, Paul's doing this because this is exactly what Jesus himself had commissioned him to do. He says, I don't want to be disobedient to the vision that I had where Jesus told me what he wants me to do. He had seen Jesus face to face. Jesus had commissioned Paul to share the gospel. He says, go to everyone, great and small, Jew and Gentile. Everybody needs to hear the gospel. Paul, you're going to be my guy to go and make that happen. And this isn't just limited to Paul. Here's where it begins to kind of touch our lives. This is not just a job that Jesus gave to Paul. Christianity is, by definition, a religion that is meant to be shared. It's meant to be spread.

Matthew 28, Jesus says to his disciples after his resurrection, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. When he says teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, that includes the command to go and make disciples. Right? So what Jesus says to his disciples are, I want you to go and make disciples who make disciples who make disciples on down to us. So part of what it means to be a disciple is to be a disciple maker.

Christianity is meant to be spread. And that is really anathema to our culture. I don't have to tell you that. I'm sure you're feeling that right now. According to Barna research, the majority of people in our country, the majority of people in our country think that if you share your faith and try to convert other people to your faith, that means that you are a religious extremist.

That's something that religious wackos do. And in fact, Christians themselves are trending in this direction. The latest research says that almost half of Christian millennials, that would be a number of us in this room, believe that evangelism is wrong. That we shouldn't be doing it at all. It's actually morally wrong to try to convert other people to your faith. This is Christians who believe that. And I think it's safe to assume that there are probably some people listening who would agree.

Right? Some people in this room who would say, yeah, why can't we just keep our faith to ourselves? Why do we need to share it? And that's gone wrong so many times in the past. And you think about all of the coercion and the manipulation. And why do we have to do this? It makes me so uncomfortable.

[ 8 : 27 ] Well, the answer is pretty straightforward. It's because the gospel is public truth. The gospel is public truth. That comes from Leslie Newbigin, who was an Anglican missionary in India for decades. The gospel is not like other religions. See, the gospel isn't like a set of teachings or metaphysical propositions. It's not really a lifestyle or a moral to-do list that we impose on other people. It has implications for all of those spheres, but at its core, that's not what the gospel is. At its core, the gospel is public truth. What is a public truth? Public truth is an account of things that have happened in history and what those things mean. That's what public truth means. So this is why Paul says in verse 26, the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly, for I'm persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. Paul's saying everybody knows that this happened. I'm not telling you anything that you don't know already because you've been alive. Anybody who hasn't been living in a closet knows what's been happening? See, there are people in our society who deny things like the Holocaust or who deny that the

Apollo moon landing ever happened. You know, Stanley Kubrick produced it or who say that all racism ended when slavery was abolished, right? So there are a lot of people in our society who believe things like this.

So let me ask you this. If you're talking to somebody who's a Holocaust denier, do you feel like it's morally wrong to try to change their mind? You know, to try to convince them that it did happen? Is that an area where you feel like you should just say, well, you have your truth and I'll do my truth?

See, I think most people in this room, and probably most people out on the street, would actually feel the opposite. You'd feel almost a moral imperative to try to change their mind, to try to convince them that it did happen, that these things are true, that even though slavery was abolished, racism continues in all kinds of other ways, right? You would try to change their mind.

And the reason that you would want to do that is because these are all examples of public truth. These are things that happened in history, and these are accounts of what those things mean or what they don't mean. And what we believe about these things, like abolition or like the Holocaust, those profoundly impact how we live our lives and how we order our society.

So it really matters what you believe about these things. And if it's true that God has actually entered into history through His Son, who died on the cross, and then rose from the grave, and that God has done this in order to redeem and renew all of creation, that is the single most important public truth there is.

[11:38] So it raises the question, should we not try to persuade people that this happened, and that it means all of those things, right? Yes, the Holocaust happened, right? Yes, we landed on the moon, and yes, when Jesus died on the cross and rose from death, that was God entering into history to redeem all of creation.

That's what it means. People are free to accept that or to reject it, right? But let us not make the mistake of thinking that this is merely private religious sentimentality.

That is simply not what we're dealing with here. The gospel is a claim about events that have happened in history that have implications for every human, every child, every animal, every blade of grass, every atom in the entire universe.

So Paul's aim is to persuade as many people as he can to believe this truth about Jesus. Not just you, O King Agrippa, but everybody in this room, everybody who can hear me.

So now we have to ask, well, how does Paul go about doing this? Paul's method. Paul doesn't, if you notice, lay out a series of life principles or moral imperatives.

[12:55] Paul begins by telling his own story. He says, let me tell you my experience with Jesus. This is what it's been like for me. So he begins by telling history, right?

And when he gets to the part about the resurrection of Jesus, it's interesting. It often seems that when Paul gets to the part about the resurrection, that's when he loses his audience, right?

They're with him up to that point and they say, bah, I can't hear anymore, right? And that's exactly what happens. But, you know, he gets to verse 24 and Festus interrupts him and he essentially says to Paul, Paul, you're insane.

You know, the things that you're saying sound crazy. You sound like a crazy person. You know, you're clearly smart. So maybe you've just read so many books that it's just driven you mad. But you're crazy.

And he's kind of mocking Paul. You can imagine, he says, Paul, you're insane. And you can imagine all of these people kind of around kind of chuckling and murmuring and whispering under their breath. This guy's a nut job. And this is basically what many people in the West think of Christians and what Christians believe these days.

[14:03] You know, Christianity is often portrayed in the West as a faith for the weak or the psychologically disabled. Friedrich Nietzsche said that Christianity was the religion of the weak.

Karl Marx said Christianity was a fantasy that distracts people from their real economic problems. Lenin called Christianity a drug that enables people to tolerate oppression.

You know, Sigmund Freud said religion is basically just a form of wish fulfillment rooted in the Oedipal complex. Right? You guys are crazy. You're weak.

You're mentally feeble. That's why you're religious. And Paul responds not by getting defensive, not with a counterattack, but he responds with tremendous grace and poise.

He simply looks Festus right in the eye and he says, I'm not out of my mind. I'm not out of my mind, most excellent Festus. Incredible grace. But I'm speaking true and rational words.

[15:04] And that is how Christianity is meant to be shared. That's how it's meant to be spread. That's how it's meant to be conveyed. Through true and rational words. Not through coercion. That has happened in history.

That is not of the Lord. Not through force. That is not of the Lord. Not through manipulation. That is not of the Lord. Through logical, persuasive argumentation based on historic events.

Public truth. This is what happened. This is why we believe it happened. This is what it means for you. While there are some people who try to claim that Jesus never existed, the overwhelming consensus among a very wide range of scholars of all faiths is that Jesus did, in fact, exist. There's simply too much evidence to deny it. So we have this historic reality that we have to figure out what to do with. And we have multiple eyewitness accounts of Jesus' public life and his ministry. You know, scholars used to claim that the Gospels were very obviously written hundreds of years after the fact. But that idea is actually more and more outdated. The most recent scholarship has determined that these accounts were written much earlier than previously thought.

[16:26] If you want to read more about that, read Richard Baucom's Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. You know, these accounts were written within the lifetime of people who heard and saw Jesus for themselves. And this is very important for us to understand because many other religions hinge on the private religious experience or revelation of one single individual.

And everything hinges on that person telling the truth. Right? Right? Right? So Joseph Smith or even the prophet Muhammad.

Right? There's this experience or this revelation that they are given that they then spread to all of their followers. And it hinges on the credibility of their testimony. Jesus, by contrast, had a very public ministry.

He had a very public death. He had a very public burial. He had a very public resurrection. It says in 1 Corinthians 15 that there were over 500 witnesses to his resurrection alone.

So you don't have just one person making a whole lot of claims and saying, trust me, believe me, God told me all this and now I'm telling you. You have multiple eyewitness accounts written by different people that focus on different themes and include different details and omit other details.

[17:44] And they're all kind of unique in their own way. And they reflect the author or authors. And they reflect the audience that they had in mind. And yet, they all agree on what happened. And they all agree on what it means.

Right? That's very compelling. You know, in Acts chapter 26, as I said a moment ago, Paul says to King Agrippa, you know these things are true. This did not happen in a corner.

That person saw it. He saw it. She saw it. They saw it. They were all there. They were there.

Everybody saw it. You know, what's really interesting about this is, think about this, for several years, Jesus had a very public ministry.

And there was a very powerful, influential group of people bent on shutting him down. They wanted to do everything they could to discredit and shut Jesus down. Never once did they deny that the miracles happened.

Right? I mean, if you're trying to discredit this local rabble rouser, and people are saying, did you see what he did the other day when he healed that guy, got up off the mat and walked, and that person was blind, and then that person came into the temple and said, I can see.

[18:52] And then Lazarus, who wasn't just dead, but it stunk. You know, you could smell the decay, and then all of a sudden Lazarus comes out of the tomb. Did you know that he did those things?

The easiest thing, if you were one of Jesus' opponents, the easiest way to shut him down would be to say, those things never happened. Those are myths that his followers made up to make him seem larger than life.

They never happen. They never do that once. The only thing that his opponents can do throughout all of the gospel accounts is to attribute the miracles to the work of Satan rather than God.

Now, why wouldn't they just say they never happened? Well, the only plausible explanation is that there were simply too many witnesses. Right? There's no point in trying to deny that it happened.

Everybody knew it had happened. So all they could do was to try to discredit the source of the power. Yeah, I know Lazarus was raised, but it was obviously Satan that did that. Right?

[19:50] That was the only thing they could do. So Paul says, these things didn't happen in a corner. This is public truth. This is public knowledge. So Paul's method is to lay out the arguments for the truth of Christianity based on the historic evidence about Jesus in a logical and rational way.

And I want to say one more thing about his method before we move on that's every bit as important. Notice Paul's posture. Notice his tone. Even though Festus is mocking him, even though there are probably people who are sort of snickering under their breath, thinking that Paul is ridiculous, Paul's tone is extraordinarily respectful and extraordinarily gracious all throughout this conversation.

He shows tremendous respect to his audience. In any argument or debate, the first person to lose their cool typically loses the debate. Right?

That's just a good word of wisdom to live by. But there's more going on here. When you're talking about the gospel, the tone matters as much as the content. If you're talking about grace, but you do it in a way that is not gracious, you undermine the truth of the words that you speak.

Right? So one of our values at Church of the Advent is the value of gracious orthodoxy. It is very important to contend for the truth. But the way we do that is every bit as essential.

[ 21 : 15 ] And if your tone is not a tone of grace and respect and generosity and compassion and love, you will undermine the orthodoxy that you proclaim.

So that's Paul's method. Finally, I want to look briefly just at Paul's confidence. Again, you know, I think of myself standing where Paul is standing, maybe in rags, chains, surrounded by all of these powerful people.

And I think about the poise, the presence of mind that Paul exhibits. And you ask, how in the world, you know, if I'm ever in a situation where somebody is taking me to task, calling me crazy over what I believe.

You know, I had somebody one time say, you actually believe that? And I said, yeah. And she spit on the ground at my feet. And I remember at that time, I did not feel poised. I didn't feel gracious.

You know, I was in full fight or flight mode. You know, I either wanted to hurl something back at her or run away. I felt so uncomfortable. And yet Paul is so poised.

[ 22 : 21 ] How? Verse 22, Paul says, To this day, I've had the help that comes from God. And so I stand here testifying to both small and great.

Here's the answer. Paul knows he's not alone. He may look alone. He may look like he's standing there all powerless, chained up. But he knows that that's far from true.

And Paul knows that even as he tries to persuade people, the Spirit of God is pursuing people. He knows that there are people in that room that the Spirit is working in their hearts right then and there, even as he is speaking.

People in whom God has been working maybe for years and years and years. Can't see it. But he knows it's happening. The Spirit of God is pursuing people.

How does Paul know? Because that's exactly what happened to Paul. That's how Paul converted and became a believer. You know, when Paul meets Jesus on the road, this is the third time in Acts he tells his conversion story.

[ 23 : 18 ] And this comes a little bit before the passage that Evan read a little while ago. Jesus says to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

Now, what's a goad? Well, a goad's like a pointed stick. And you use it to get livestock moving in the right direction. Right? You prod them. You poke them so that they will move in the right direction.

And so here's what Jesus is saying. He's essentially saying that when Paul persecuted Christians, when you were persecuting those people, you were actually doing that as a way to kick against the goading of the Holy Spirit in your life.

That's why you were such a fanatic. That's why you were so zealous. Right? You went above and beyond in trying to shut the Christians down. You were kicking against the goads the whole time.

Paul's fanaticism was very likely an attempt to compensate for secret doubts that he had been harboring for who knows how long. Another way of saying it is, Paul was in denial.

[ 24 : 20 ] And it took the Holy Spirit to break through that denial. You know, Paul Applebaum is the former head of the American Psychiatric Association. And this is what he says about denial.

He says denial is, quote, the deliberate, often psychologically motivated neglect of information that would be too upsetting or anxiety-provoking to allow into one's belief system.

Now, that's really important. There are lots of bits of information out there that we won't even allow ourselves to consider might be true because it would be too anxiety-provoking if it were to be true.

I can't even consider that as a possibility because it would wreck my life if it were true. Right? So cigarette manufacturers long denied that smoking was harmful.

You know, oil companies have funded groups questioning climate change and anthropogenic climate change. And you ask, well, why would they do that? Well, in the words of Upton Sinclair, it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.

[ 25 : 33 ] Paul's entire career depended on Jesus not being the Son of God. Right? Paul's salary depended on him not believing that. Right? If he believes that, then what?

He loses his salary, his job, his credibility, his reputation. Then he becomes the crazy guy in chains getting laughed at by a whole room full of people. And that was not Paul.

Paul was brilliant, highly educated, Ivy League. Right? On a rocket ship to the very top upper echelon of society. He didn't want to be the crazy guy in chains.

Same with Festus. Same with King Agrippa. Scripture tells us that both of these men were very motivated to keep the Jews happy. How do you keep the Jews happy? Christians are crazy. They don't know what they're talking about.

So conversion for either of these men would be career suicide. Agrippa says, you're trying to convert me? And then you can almost see him looking around and say, that's crazy.

[ 26 : 33 ] You know, he's signaling to his Jewish listeners. Don't worry. I'm still with you. You can still trust me. So there are some people out there, I think, who reject the public truth of the gospel not because they have examined the evidence and they found it lacking.

They've rejected the gospel outright because the implications are too upsetting. They are too anxiety provoking. And so they won't even consider the possibility that it might be true.

It has been said in the past by people like Jesse Ventura that Christianity is a crutch for the weak. I actually think these days, if you live in a place like D.C., agnosticism is a crutch.

It's way easier to say, I don't really know what I believe, than to actually say, I believe this, and to be mocked, yelled at, or spit upon. Right? So agnosticism is a very helpful crutch.

Right? Coming to faith in Jesus might wreck your life. You know, it might mean for some of you career suicide. It might massively impact the relationship that you have with your family.

[ 27 : 44 ] There are some people in our church who, after they came to faith, were completely disowned by their families because they grew up in another religion. And the one thing you don't do in that religion is to become a Christian.

So we baptized somebody years ago who, that act of baptism was almost a kind of separation ceremony from her mom and dad. We baptized somebody else who, because of that, wasn't able to go back to her country of origin.

She tried to go back one time, and word had gotten around that she had become a Christian and was baptized in the U.S. before going back to see her family, and she was attacked. They yelled threats and slurs at her outside of her own house, back in her home country.

Right? So it might wreck your life. It might have massive implications for how you use your body, or your time, or your money. But some of us, some people, nevertheless, like Paul, have secret doubts.

A little voice in your head saying, maybe Jesus is who he claimed to be. Maybe the fact that roughly a third of the world's population in some way believes this is compelling. I've never really looked at the evidence.

[ 28 : 57 ] I've never really considered what it might mean. And maybe the Spirit is at work in you even now. So let me ask you this. What would you say to a cigarette manufacturer who denies that cigarettes are harmful?

Right? Most people would say, listen, I know you make a lot of money off this. That's no secret. I know you make a lot of money off this. I know you live a very comfortable life. I know you have a vested interest in denying that cigarettes are harmful, because the more you sell, the more you make.

But listen, man, if there is even the slightest chance that this is true, is it not worth you looking at the evidence? If it is true, the implications are too massive.

You can't simply deny something is true, because it makes your life easier. At least look at the evidence. That's what you would say, right? Now, would you be willing to take your own advice?

If there is even a chance that Jesus might be the risen Son of God, you cannot simply ignore it, because it makes your life easier. The implications are too massive.

[ 30 : 05 ] Paul spent years kicking against the goads, denying what he secretly feared might be true. But eventually he realized this, that having a relationship with Jesus is worth whatever it might cost him, whatever it might do to his life.

It's worth being in chains. It's worth being ridiculed and called crazy and insane. Because at the end of the day, the thing that Paul most longed for and the thing that we all most long for is to know that

we are fully known and fully loved.

And there is no one who knows you better than the God who made you. And there is no one who loves you more than the God who sacrificed himself for you.

And a relationship with a God like that is worth everything we have. It is the treasure in the field. It is the pearl of great price. It is worth whatever it might cost.

Because there is no way whatever we sacrifice will ever come close to the price he paid to have a relationship with us. Let's pray. Lord, we know as Paul knew that mere words don't change hearts and lives.

[ 31 : 21 ] That that is the work of your Holy Spirit. You say in Philippians that God will bring to completion the good work that he has begun in his people.

And we are all at different stages of that renovation, Lord. Some of us are well into our renovation. It has been happening for years.

You have been at work in us since our earliest memories. Others of us, maybe we are still unsure if we even need you. If you are even there, Lord. We are still filled with doubts.

Others yet, maybe we have been so wrecked in our lives that you have torn the house down to the studs. Lord, it is a gut job. It has been brought down to the foundation.

And you are rebuilding us from the ground up, Lord. Wherever we are, we trust and know that you are the kind of God who can begin a good work in us and bring it to completion. And we pray in the hope of your work in us and in the name of Jesus Christ that you would do that for all of us this morning.

[ 32 : 27 ] In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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