

Contrasting responses

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 March 2025

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] How did you react to the White House video? You couldn't make it up, could you? Political cartoonists having a field day. People react to the gospel in different ways.

! In our passage this morning, Luke actually tells us more about how people reacted to what Paul and Silas actually said and did.

There's a whole lot of words in this passage that are about their reaction. Some of them were persuaded, verse 4. Others were jealous, verse 5. There was turmoil in verse 8.

Bereans were noble in verse 9, whatever that means. We'll think about that in a minute. But the Bereans certainly had eagerness, verse 11, and they searched the scriptures. The NIV says examined, but it seems to me searched is a better word there.

But all this happened 2,000 years ago. Surely it can't have much relevance to spreading the gospel today. But actually, I think it can. Somehow the enemies of the gospel today seem to be using the same playbook as these Jews 2,000 years ago.

[1:23] There are all sorts of parallels between our 21st century multicultural Western society and the 1st century multicultural Roman Empire.

To examine this history can be very illuminating. But if we're going to shed light, we have to look into the culture a little bit. A bit of background information. So what's going on?

Led by the Holy Spirit, in chapter 16, verse 9, Paul and Silas... Yeah, Brenda's shouting, mouthing slow down at me. Led by the Holy Spirit, in chapter 16, verse 9, Paul and Silas were in Greece.

They'd come to Thessalonica, in chapter 17, verse 1. Here we're told there was a Jewish synagogue. But what was that synagogue doing here?

After all, we were an awful long way from Jerusalem. How did it get there? And who are these God-fearing Greeks, anyway? Who are these groups of people?

[2:36] We need to fill in a bit of background cultural information to understand what's going on. So first of all, who were these Jews?

While Daniel was in exile in Babylon, he had predicted that the Jews would return from exile and that a succession of four empires would arise before the Messiah came.

These are now generally taken to be the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Greek and the Roman empires. So they were expecting the Messiah.

During this turbulent period, Jews had been displaced, forcibly or by choice, all over the Mediterranean world. In fact, few Jews now had Hebrew as their first language.

Those still in the old lands of Judea and Nazareth mostly spoke Aramaic, which is a Semitic language, but it's distinct from classical Hebrew.

[3:46] But here in the wider world, in the wider Roman world, they mostly spoke Greek. Of course, the better educated would know Hebrew, but they communicated and they traded.

And to be honest, they probably thought in the Koina Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire. These are the Hellenistic Jews we often find mentioned in Luke's account.

And many of them, like Lydia, as we read about in chapter 16, verse 14, had actually prospered.

They'd settled down and become wealthy, become established in the societies where they'd settled themselves down.

What about the scriptures? Of course, the Jewish scriptures were mostly written in Hebrew. There are a few short passages in Aramaic, but they're mostly written in Hebrew.

But of course, this was not these Jews' first language. But fortunately, they had an alternative. But we have to look again a bit into history, briefly, to see what this was.

[4:58] On the north coast of Africa is the university city of Alexandria, or it was a university city in those days, founded by Alexander, the Emperor Alexander.

And this university had a great library, which aimed to collect all the important books of the ancient world together. This project had been started by an Egyptian pharaoh, in fact, Ptolemy II, 285-246 BC.

And he had commissioned Demetrius of Phelaron as the head librarian. After that, the details get a bit hazy, but according to an ancient letter, Demetrius wrote to the high priest in Jerusalem to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek.

He recruited six elders from each tribe, 72 in all, to carry out the translation. And hence, this translation became known as the Septuagint, from the Latin word for 70.

The subsequent details are unclear, but by the first century, merely all of the Old Testament scriptures, and much of the Apocrypha, had been translated.

[6:18] And this translation was certainly not without influence. It was widely circulated. And most of the New Testament quotations of the scriptures in the New Testament follow the Septuagint reading.

What about these God-fearing Greeks? Well, the Greeks and Romans were not stupid.

They now had the Jewish scriptures available in their own language, and many of them had read it, and could see, in fact, that Jewish monotheism made a lot more sense than the traditional gods of Greece and Rome, so they wanted to know more.

These people were known as God-fearers. We've already met several of them in Luke's account, haven't we? Do you remember the Ethiopian eunuch in chapter 8?

He was reading from the book of Isaiah. While we can't be absolutely certain, it's unlikely that he would have known Hebrew. Much more likely that he was reading the Greek translation.

[7:29] And certainly Luke records the quotation in Greek. Well, we met Cornelius, didn't we, in chapter 10. We were told that he and all his family were devout and God-fearing.

He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. Yet in spite of that, Peter needed a vision from heaven before he was prepared to enter Cornelius' house.

He still didn't regard Cornelius as a fully-fledged Jew. Sorry, I've got...

Too far. So this left the Hellenist Jews walking a bit of a political tightrope.

They wanted to preserve their ancient culture as the chosen people. In particular, to keep their messianic hope of a Jewish king in the line of David.

[8:38] But they had to do it in a Roman context. They couldn't just merge into the surrounding culture, but neither could they stay completely isolated from it.

Perhaps specifically, they needed the support of the God-fearing Greeks. But at the next time, at the same time, they could not acknowledge them as fully-fledged Jews unless they were prepared to buy into the whole Jewish thing of circumcision, food rules, and all that, which of course most were not.

Tricky situation. Into this delicate balancing act come Paul and Silas. The Hellenistic Jews themselves.

The Roman citizens. And at least in Paul's case, we know that he was well-learned in both Jewish and Greek culture. He could quote the scriptures or the Greek philosophers equally as he does indeed in Acts 17 in Athens.

What do we read? Chapter 17, verses 2 and 3. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.

[10:05] This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ, he said. This Messiah that Paul preached wasn't planning to restore the Davidic kings in Jerusalem by force.

He wasn't planning to overthrow the Romans. In fact, he had something much more ambitious in mind. He was going to take over the whole world. But no need to take on the Roman army because

words, not swords, were the apostles' weapon of choice.

And what's more, Paul and Silas were arguing that this was not just some newfangled sect, but was in fact the authentic voice of Judaism. Well, how did people react?

Not surprisingly, the God-fearing Greeks were quite keen to hear this. And some of the Jews were persuaded as well, but not others.

This would remove their privileged position at the center as they saw it of God's purposes. We are told that they were jealous in verse 5. So what was to be done?

[11:23] No platform. That's what we say today, isn't it?

Paul and Silas must not be allowed a platform to spread their message. At this point, in fact, the whole argument suddenly seems very 21st century.

Seems to be pretty much the same playbook as we get today. Well, what are they going to do?

They could ban Paul and Silas from the synagogue, but unfortunately it's a bit late for that.

They were just set up shop elsewhere. In fact, we read that they did exactly that later in Corinth, in chapter 19. Ban from the synagogue, they just hired a lecture hall.

That wasn't going to cut it. They could go the legal route, but then the Jews in Philippi had tried that, hadn't they?

[12:28] It didn't go well. Generally, it doesn't do so nowadays either. Have you noticed that the law can cut both ways? A lot of these so-called anti-hate speech laws, which have been set up in the West to enforce a kind of woke orthodoxy, have actually been used quite successfully to defend Christians and other dissenters against those who want to silence them.

Pretty much what happened in Philippi, in fact. Well, keep it simple. Recruit a mob. Who needs a philosophic argument?

Or who needs to pay expensive lawyers when you can just start a riot? No internet in Paul's day, of course. If you wanted a mob, you went down to the market.

In fact, there's an almost untranslatable word here, which, in the Greek, which says that these odd characters were market layabouts, is today, I think, how you would translate it.

People who were down the market, not because they were trading, but because they hadn't got anything better to do. Just the people you need if you want to start a riot. Nowadays, you just go on social media, of course.

[13:58] They can raise a mob to take direct action. And then, finally, the coup de grace, as it were, verses 6 and 7.

These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.

Add in a little misleading half-truth, for the purposes of disinformation. And Bob's your uncle, job done. Well, so it seemed.

But not really, because the church in Thessalonica survived. We have two letters that Paul would later write to them. In the beginning of 1 Thessalonians, it says that the message came to them not just in words, but in spiritual power through the Holy Spirit and in deep conviction.

These Jews may have won a battle, but they were going to lose the war. And in fact, we have the benefit of hindsight that even Luke didn't have at the time.

[15:26] Jesus had predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, but at the time of Luke's account, this had not yet happened. But it would do. This delicate balance was all going to unravel.

And that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 when those Jews in Jerusalem rebelled. Well, perhaps we can pick up some parables here.

Liberal orthodoxy is unraveling in the West, isn't it? There are riots on the streets and extremists are both left and right in our governments.

Jesus' own description of the predicted fall of Jerusalem in Matthew 24 is horrific. We don't want to see that in our Western cities, do we? Can it be prevented?

Only God knows that for certain. But we can pray and we can act because we have a better message. As Christians, we cannot hold out our message of a better way to live.

[16:38] Sorry, we can hold out our message of a better way to live. A message that peace is possible if only people will listen to reason. And

of course, the other thing to remark here is that don't follow this example.

This is not a playbook for Christians to use. But too often, Christians finding themselves in a similar situation to these Jews actually have reacted in a similar way.

Don't be a hypocrite, brothers and sisters. Do you remember that? You probably can't remember it, but when I was younger there was a song of Sidney Carter.

One verse said, the devil wore a crucifix. The Christians, they are right, the devil said, so let us burn a heretic tonight. People have argued that the Christians are right, so it's okay to suppress opposition.

But, brothers and sisters, you can't fight the devil with his own weapons and expect to win. He's had a millennia of practice at them after all.

[17:55] You can wield them much better than we can. But we have better weapons instead. Paul gives us a better example.

Bible. The Berean way, we might call it. Luke chooses to describe the Berean Jews as noble. What does this mean? Well, the word seems to mean something about their character being praiseworthy. It wasn't just that they reached the right answer, but they tackled the issue in the right way.

And that this is exemplary behavior, something to be copied. Luke is saying, don't copy the Thessalonian Jews, copy the Bereans instead.

So it's worth looking at this in a bit of detail. How would you summarize the Berean approach? I think you might describe it as cautious enthusiasm.

[19:04] The Bereans valued the scriptures. They understood that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So Paul could address them that way.

When he was in Athens, of course, talking to the philosophers, it needed a different approach and we see that next week. But the Bereans respected the scriptures, so they'd made a good start. What Paul was saying seemed on the face of it to make sense. But then they weren't going to believe it just because some itinerant preacher rocked up and announced it.

No matter how learned he appeared to be, they were going to check it out for themselves. Luke tells us that's exactly what they did. They examined the scriptures to see if these things were true.

I think actually something very profound is being said here. Dawkins and the new atheists, of course, claim that faith is based on mindlessly accepting everything you're told.

[20:11] But it isn't. In fact, you could say that faith is based on a sensible scepticism. The moment the preacher expects you to believe something just because he or she says it is the moment the church ceases to be truly Bible-based.

It says on our banner here that we claim to be a Bible-based church. Please don't take that to mean that we mindlessly quote proof text.

It's not so much that you need to necessarily challenge what the preacher says, although that might be required, but much more that you take it to heart, make the truth of your own.

As Paul describes it in 1 Thessalonians, it becomes a matter of deep conviction. You no longer say it because the preacher told you, you say it because you know it for yourself, you've understood. You know not only what is true, but why it's true. Actually, a good test of it is can you explain it to somebody else? You can do that as a good evidence you really understood.

[21:30] If you don't do that discipline, all sorts of nasty things can happen. So if an individual neglects this discipline, they're likely to drift away as Jesus taught in the parable of the sower.

The seed on poor ground is not rooted properly. The birds get it or it blows away or it gets choked by the thistles. And if a congregation neglects this discipline, it almost certainly won't end well. On the one hand, it might become a cult, slavishly obeying a forceful leader. On the other hand, it can degenerate into a mess of quasi-liberal thinking.

The Berean approach avoids these pitfalls. So what is this approach exactly? What is I actually prefer the authorised version reading here to Acts 17 11, so let me read that to you.

These Bereans were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so.

[23:09] The NIV and the ESV both say great eagerness, but it's a certain kind of eagerness. It's not the eagerness that you rush out to buy a bargain or something. It's an open-minded enthusiasm to learn, to remember that fools despise instructions and the price of wisdom is above rubies.

Luke tells us the things the Bereans actually did so we can unpack it a little. Firstly, they investigated the scriptures daily. This was clearly important so they made it a priority until they'd reached understanding.

But notice it's not just the daily repetition that's important. It's quite possible that the Thessalonian Jews would have read the scriptures regularly, certainly at least once a week in the synagogues, not every day.

But those Jews read their own prejudices into the text, so their thinking was not changed. The Bereans were reading in search of wisdom and insight.

Do you remember how James puts it in his letter, James 1, 23 to 25? Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

[24:40] But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they have heard but doing it, in other words taking it to heart, they will be blessed in what they do.

So they searched the scriptures not just to say they've read it because they really wanted to gain wisdom. Secondly, it appears from the text that they did it together.

It seems that they discussed it with each other. It's probably a good idea. guards against the more bizarre bypass and as I said putting your ideas in a form to explain to others, you gain clarity yourself.

Certainly when I was a teacher, I was a mathematics teacher at university before I retired, I found I understood things much better when I'd sit down to say how am I going to explain this to somebody else.

it's always a good way to become clear. In summary then, the Bereans studied with purpose, careful, engaged analysis, what we call critical thinking.

[25:57] I hesitate to use that phrase but I will do because people think it means being critical. That's not really what it means. It means engaging with the argument, not just reading it in a superficial way.

Asking questions of the text, disagreeing with it is necessary. I hope you won't disagree with the scripture. You can disagree with what other people say.

They did it with an object in mind. They wanted to know if Paul was right. Was Jesus truly the Messiah or were they being sold a scam?

We notice that Paul had used reason to make his case in verse 2. He reasoned with the Jews. Bereans used a critical analysis to test that case in verse 11.

They looked through the Old Testament, presumably the passages that Paul hadn't quoted as well, to see if they pointed in the same direction. At this point you may have an objection yourself.

[27:08] doesn't this all sound rather unspiritual? After all, Paul wrote, he's made as competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit, for the letter kills but the spirit gives life.

But I'll repeat, anyone can recite slogans. you can probably find a Bible verse to support anything if you try hard enough. If you look at the context of that verse I've just quoted, it's all about the Jews failing to understand what the scriptures were really about.

If you're familiar with it, just think of the book of Job. Pages and pages of Job's comforters mouthing spiritual platitudes without really thinking whether they made sense.

The Lord's comment is brief and to the point. Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? The work of the spirit is to bring understanding, not mindless obedience.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, the wind blows where it pleases. You hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.

[28:31] How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and you do not understand these things. The spirit brings

understanding and conviction.

All we're told in this passage is that Paul reasoned with the Thessalonians. But in 1 Thessalonians 1 he says that the words came not just with words, but with the power of the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

The Bereans method is the spiritual method. The evidence that the spirit was at work amongst the Bereans was their open minds.

In fact, they were prepared to listen. That was the work of the spirit. And as I said, Paul most certainly didn't think it was unspiritual to use reasoned arguments.

Well, of course, this is a sermon, so you have to have an application. And I think the application of this passage to us this morning is clear enough. Whether you've been a believer for years, or whether you're just starting on the Christian life, or even if you're still inquiring, my message to you this morning is think like a Berean.

[29:50] do your homework, engage your brain before opening your mouth. And don't believe just because I tell you, or any other preacher who stands up in this pulpit, for that matter.

Make the truth your own, as the spirit gives you understanding. Proverbs 3, 13 to 15 says, Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver, and yields better returns than gold.

Somebody would tell Donald Trump that. She is more precious than rubies, nothing you desire can compare with her. How to live at a time of crisis.

I recommend the approach of Paul and Silas in the Berean. Use reason, logic, and a calm faith that God is on the throne. Study the scriptures, which are ancient history, but they contain wisdom to understand the world today.

Remember that all truth is God's truth. Well, Paul and Silas are moving on. They're going to Athens. That's a very different challenge as we will look at next week.

[31:15] as we prepare for that trip. Here's a thought for the journey. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.

They don't use the playbook of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. Well, that sounds good, but what are these strongholds?

Paul leads us in no doubt. We demolish arguments. When did you last demolish an argument? When did I?

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. And we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Christ. So that's my message to you this morning. Don't use the playbook of the Thessalonian Jews. Rather, think like a Berean.

[32:20] Thank you.