

Urban Evangelism and Scripture in Thessalonica

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

I'm Terri Cochie. I'm part of the North Berkeley and Wednesday Women's Community Groups. And today's scripture reading is from the book of Acts, chapter 17, verses 1 through 15, as printed in the liturgy.

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.

This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah, he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

[1 : 1 7] But other Jews were jealous. So they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city.

They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting, These men, who have caused trouble all over the world, have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house.

They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.

Then they made Jason and the others post-bond and let them go. As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

[2 : 3 2] As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.

The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you, Terry, for that scripture reading again.

My name's Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here. And it's my privilege and honor to share God's word with you today. Would you join me in prayer? Lord God, we are so thankful that you're a God who speaks.

You're a God who has spoken to us. You've given us the scriptures and we just pray that you would give us ears to hear, hearts to receive what you have for us in your word today.

[3 : 44] We pray all these things in the strong name of Jesus. Amen. Well, Christ Church, I'm coming up here with tons of trepidation and insecurity having to follow after Christine's sermon last week from Posture the City, right?

That was pretty amazing, right? But here we go, right? Continuing our series in the book of Acts, we're considering as a church what it looks like to bear witness to Christ, both in word and in deed, right?

So last week, we talked about foster children, how we can care for them in this city, and that was a discussion of how we could bear witness to Christ in deed. But today, here as we look at Acts chapter 17, the focus is shifting to how we can bear witness to Christ with words.

We're going to look at Paul's method of communicating the gospel. We're going to ask the question, how did Paul evangelize, all right? Evangelize is a fancy word. It means good newsing.

How did Paul good news? How did he share this incredibly great, life-changing news about Jesus? We're going to ask, how did he do it? What was his method? And Acts chapter 17 is going to help us answer this question.

[4 : 49] So if you'll turn with me to verse 1, I want us to notice the first thing he does upon entering Thessalonica and then Berea, okay? We've seen it again and again throughout Acts. Verse 2 says, As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures.

All right, and at this point, you might just think, okay, yeah, so what, right? Isn't this what a Christian missionary just does? They open the Bible with people and show them what it says and try to persuade them to believe it, right?

Well, yes, that's true, but also not exactly, and not so simplistically, not so impersonally. As we will see next week when Paul is in a non-Jewish context, appearing before the Greek philosophers of Athens, and as we already saw in Acts chapter 14, right, when he was in Lystra and they worshipped him as the god Hermes, Paul's method inside and outside the synagogue are actually quite distinct, right?

They're quite distinct. He doesn't have one single mechanical, robotic, one-size-fits-all gospel presentation for everybody. You know, he doesn't embark on the Romans road every single time or tell people the four spiritual laws or use that colorful wordless book or the bracelet or quote John 3, 16 every single time.

And don't get me wrong, none of these ways are bad to share about Jesus, but they all come out of very particular contexts in which people were trying to meet very particular needs.

[6 : 17] And we need to recognize that according to Paul's method and example, to bear witness about Christ is not just to impersonally spout off and regurgitate a list of Christian beliefs for people to receive or reject.

But Paul's strategy is not simply to communicate propositions, but to engage in the art of persuasion, to engage people's hearts. So yes, sometimes he will open up the scriptures like here in the Jewish synagogue.

And as we will see next week at other times, he doesn't even open up the scriptures, doesn't even cite the scriptures without at all neglecting the truth of the scriptures. But what he does do every single time, every single time, is he always engages the highest allegiances of people's hearts and minds, their highest sources of authority.

He addresses the things that matter the most to people, the things that they value the most, the things that most control their lives. So for the Greeks, it was their Greek philosophy or perhaps their Greek gods, right?

But for those in this Jewish synagogue, it's not Zeus. It's not Hermes. It's not the wisdom of Socrates. It's the scriptures. It's the scriptures. So again, Paul is coming into these Jewish synagogues doing Bible studies, not just because this is what Christian missionaries do.

[7 : 34] No. He's opening up the scriptures with the Jewish people because he's being strategic. He's meeting them where they're at, where their allegiances are, where their highest sources of authority are.

And this is so important for us to understand the method of Apostle Paul. And it's so important for us as we implement our own method of bearing witness to Christ with our words. We don't just go about disseminating information.

We don't hold up a big sign just saying, Jesus loves you, repent of your sins. John 3, 16. We don't throw Bibles at people. We don't scatter pamphlets and tracts out on the streets and just think, okay, I've done my job.

No. We get to know people intimately. And we learn what they most value. And we discern what has the greatest hold upon their hearts and their heads and their hands. And we meet them there, all the while seeking to show them how the good news of Jesus truly and most satisfyingly addresses their deepest needs, their deepest longings, their deepest concerns.

And I like to call this method the method of subversive fulfillment. Subversive fulfillment. Now, I plan to talk more about this strategy of subversive fulfillment when we get to Paul's speech at Athens next week.

[8 : 43] But today, we're going to focus on the unique allegiance, the unique source of authority that Paul recognized here in the Jewish synagogue, and that was the scriptures, which they believed what?

To be the very word of God. So today, we're going to look at Paul's evangelistic method in the Jewish scriptures where he engages their deepest allegiances, and then he points them to Christ and Christ's alternative kingdom.

All right, so here are my three points for today. First, the starting point for God's people is God's word. Second, the main point of God's word is God's son. And third, the end point of God's son is God's kingdom.

All right, so first, the starting point for God's people is God's word. Again, Paul meets people where they're at. So in this Jewish synagogue, he starts with the scriptures. Now, the question I want to ask, though, is why did the Jewish people, including Paul, and including our Savior, Jesus Christ himself, why did they have such a high view of the scriptures?

Why did they have such a high view of the scriptures? Why did they have such a strong allegiance and so completely submit themselves to these ancient collections of writings in a book?

[9 : 55] Why? Why? Well, we have to understand the Jewish view of the scriptures. And actually, not simply how the Jewish people viewed the scriptures, but from the beginning, how the whole people of God have faithfully viewed the scriptures.

And we could do multiple, you know, graduate-level courses on this, but here's my best, you know, sermon-length shot at it, okay? Let's go. Systematic Theology 101, the doctrine of God's word.

Now, the people of God's understanding of God's word, actually, it goes further back to even before the scriptures came into existence, right? It all starts, actually, with the triune God, who from eternity, even before creation, even before the development of human language, Father, Son, and Spirit have always spoken and communicated amongst themselves words of love and joy and harmony and glory and honor.

And this is where our understanding of the word of God has to start. It has to start with the triune God who speaks. In fact, God's breath has always existed, right? The Holy Spirit. And what does John's gospel call the Son?

In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word was God. And the word became flesh. So it all starts with this vocal, triune God who speaks from all eternity.

[11 : 09] And yet, also, who decided to speak a creative word. He decided to create the whole universe with another word, a creative word.

By his word, he said what? Let there be. And literally, the rest was history. The heavens and the earth, the creation of the universe, including some creatures, right? Made in his very own image, filled with his very breath, and thus, in many ways, like him, creative and communicative human beings.

And so this triune God, he continued to speak, not just amongst himself, and not just a creative word of creation, but he also continued to speak covenantal words, relational words, expressing his will to these creatures, starting with the first of them, Adam and Eve.

He said, be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Spread the image of God across the face of the earth, and this was his first word to humanity. Exercise your God-given authority over creation for your good and for my glory.

But the thing is, with the freedom and authority that were given to the first human beings, these exalted creatures made in God's image, they defied God's authority and shattered God's image by questioning and disobeying God's word.

[12 : 25] The very word that made them, the very breath that brought them life, and all creation with them was plunged into a state of brokenness and death, because God's word had been disregarded.

But you know what? This is the beauty of the gospel, that the triune God, who from eternity was not content to speak words of glory and praise just amongst himself, who did not have to speak words of creation, and who certainly did not have to speak words of redemption, this triune God resolved, and he committed himself to speak words of hope and redemption into his fallen creation.

To creatures who had disregarded his word, he spoke another word to us, not merely a word of righteousness and justice and truth, but a word of grace, a word of hope.

He spoke to them a word about a savior, the savior, the offspring of the woman who would conquer evil once and for all at great cost to himself. And as God's people awaited this savior to reverse the fall, God continued to speak to them words of truth and grace, progressively clearer and clearer promises about this coming savior and about this plan to make them heirs of his glorious, imperishable kingdom.

And as the writer of Hebrews says, God spoke to them in various ways and at various times and especially through Moses and the prophets who would follow after him. And it was there, right there, in the beginning of this prophetic tradition, beginning with Moses, that God commanded his people to start recording many of the things that he had spoken to them.

[13 : 59] And that's where we get the Ten Commandments. That's where we get the law of Moses. And inspired by God's spirit, the people of God continued to record the words and the acts and the deeds of God amongst them, including his greatest word, his greatest word, his greatest act in history, his grand and final act of redemption in Jesus Christ.

And Christ Church, that is how we got this Bible. That's how we got this Bible. Jesus recognized the Jewish scriptures of the Old Testament and his chosen spirit-filled apostles completed this written revelation from God about him with the New Testament.

That's what we have right here in the Bible, in the scriptures. But what you also have to understand is that for God's people, this book wasn't simply like just any other book.

All you have to do is read the longest chapter in this book. It's Psalm 119, and you'll notice the crazy high regard that God's people have always had for the scriptures as the very word of God.

They viewed it as holding the very truth and righteousness and authority and power and eternality of God himself. Psalm 119, verse 89 says, Your word, Lord, is eternal.

[15 : 15] It stands firm in the heavens. They viewed the scriptures as righteous, as trustworthy as God himself. Verse 137, You are righteous, Lord, and your laws are right.

The statutes you have laid down are righteous. They are fully trustworthy. And based on this view of the word of God as right and true and trustworthy, they sought to see everything else in light of the word of God.

All reality. They held up to the light, to the authoritative standard of the scriptures. Verse 105, Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

They put all their hope, even for salvation, in this word from God, in the scriptures. My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word. And get this, it wasn't some old, cold, authoritative book of laws for them to follow to, you know, get saved.

But it was truly sweet. And it was truly liberating to the people of God. Verse 103, How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Verse 45, I walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.

[16 : 21] Christ, this is how the people of God, including Paul, including Jesus himself, this is how we have always been meant to view the scriptures as our starting point.

Submitting ourselves to the law, orienting ourselves around this wisdom. This is how the people of God saw the scriptures, and they saw the history and the trajectory of Israel's recorded story, which culminated in Christ and was worked out in the history of the church.

They saw this story as integral with their very own stories, and not just their own stories, but central to the very plot line of world history. See, the starting point for God's people always has to be God's word.

It's always been God's word for God's people. Their highest, most righteous, most trustworthy, the eternal authority from God himself, recorded and written for us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit here in the scriptures.

See, that's what this is. That's what we have here in the Bible. This is the word of God. Words of truth. Words of life. Words of hope. Words of redemption. And that's what we're committed to here at Christ Church.

[17 : 26] Not the ways of culture. Not the ways of human social progress and evolution. No, we are committed primarily, ultimately, to the word of God, recorded here in the scriptures.

But maybe now some of you are skeptical. You're still skeptical. You're like, okay, that sounds nice, but really, how do you know? How do you know? How do you know that this is the word of God? Andrew, all I've heard you say so far is that the so-called people of God have viewed the scriptures as the word of God because according to these same scriptures, God has said so.

But surely you cannot expect me to just accept this circular reasoning, right? And I understand how for many of us, this just sounds like a huge and impossible leap of faith to take.

Even for those of us who genuinely want to believe, but just can't shake our doubts and can't shake our skepticism. I get it. And I fully admit that, yes, I believe that the scriptures are God's authoritative, trustworthy, and good word because they say they are.

And because the Jesus that they testify to also believe this about the scriptures. But maybe for you, this is still, in the words of Bertrand Russell, not enough evidence, right?

[18 : 36] Maybe it's still not enough evidence for you. And if this is you today, I get it. I get it. I really do. But may I, as gently as I can, can I just honestly ask you, well then, what would constitute enough evidence?

Would it be being there on Mount Sinai with Moses receiving the Ten Commandments? Would that do it? How about the empty tomb or the over 500 eyewitnesses of the risen Christ?

If you had every shred of evidence you could possibly think to ask for, would it truly be enough? Or is the issue actually not a lack of evidence, but rather are humanistic, naturalistic, enlightenment-shaped standards of arriving at knowledge and certainty in the first place?

Standards that themselves are unverifiable and unproven. Really consider, what is the fruit? What is the fruit of an unwavering dogmatic skepticism?

What is the fruit of it? Or might C.S. Lewis be right when he said that to see through everything is to see nothing at all? I mean, by such dogmatic skepticism, how do we know anything at all, really?

[19 : 51] Think about that, for reals. How do we know anything at all if we're just committed to doubt? The New York Times says one thing, and the Wall Street Journal says another. CNN says this. Fox News says that. One academic interprets the data this way.

Another interprets it that way. The Islamic fundamentalists dogmatically insist that they know the truth about God, and the secular agnostic dogmatically insist that we can't know the truth about God.

Whom shall we believe? To whom shall we turn? When will we ever be free to lay down our doubts? Or when might it be time to doubt our doubts?

What should be our starting point? This is the question that we all have to answer by faith. Even if you don't consider yourself a person of faith, and you, I would argue, naively, but genuinely believe that everything you do is purely rational and neutral and objective, you still ultimately have to answer this question when you get to the bottom of it.

What is the starting point that you are putting your faith upon? For those who confess that Jesus is Lord, the starting point for God's people is God's Word.

[20 : 58] And if you haven't started there, I want to invite you to start there with us today. We have a scripture reading plan. You could start with us in the epistles. The reading plan for this week is in the liturgy. Start reading the Bible with us. And really, I don't say any of this to belittle those of us who struggle with doubt, or who have difficulty embracing scripture as God's Word.

But I do hope to challenge all of us to consider the question that we need to return to all the time. By what light, by what ultimate authority, do we judge what is true and real and good and beautiful?

One thing I love about this passage in Acts chapter 17 is verse 11, where it says that the Bereans were of even more noble character than those in Thessalonica. Not because they accepted Paul's Word like uncritical dummies, but because they eagerly received Paul's message, examining it daily, holding it up to the light of the scriptures.

They subjected even an apostle's word, even someone who had personal experience with Jesus, who the whole church spoke well of and sent to them, they subjected even this guy to the scriptures.

And they were commended for it. Paul commended them for it. Luke commended them for it. And you know, I know many of us are wrestling with doubt, unsure about the Bible and its claims about Jesus. But as a pastor here at Christ Church, please hear me say that I'm so glad you're here.

[22 : 18] I'm so glad you're here to work that out. And I don't think that it's an accident that you're sitting here today. And I want to invite you again to examine the scriptures with us, like the Bereans. This isn't a place where you have to check your head at the door.

It's a place to wrestle with your hardest questions. Bring them. Bring them to the Word of God. And see what God might have to say in the scriptures. Paul went into these synagogues.

And it says in verses 2 and 3 that he reasoned with them from the scriptures. And he explained and proved all types of things. He went deep with these people into God's Word. And I and Jonathan and our elders and many people here are committed to doing the same thing with any of you who are interested in exploring the claims of Christianity.

I know there are some things in the Bible that are hard to understand. The Bible itself admits that. So email me. My email is in the liturgy. Let's talk about it. I love getting emails from many of you about what the Bible says and how to understand it.

Even your emails that critique my sermons. I love those too. Yeah, there are tons of those guys. But you know why I love those too? Because it's an opportunity.

[23 : 28] Because it doesn't matter what I say. That's the whole point. It matters what God has said in the scriptures. And I love your critiques of my sermons because that's an opportunity for us as the people of God, as the community of faith, to have as our starting point the Word of God.

To open up the scriptures together. To take every thought captive to Christ and His Word in the scriptures. Because again, the starting point for God's people is God's Word. Written and recorded right here in the scriptures.

Alright, now I think for the past couple sermons I've tended to do this. I've just spent like over 90% of the sermon on my first point. So I promise I'm going to be super brief about these next two. Alright, I've just tried to persuade us that the scriptures are God's true and trustworthy Word.

Right? But what I also love about the scriptures, and I think what actually wins most people over, is not simply their truthfulness, but their beauty.

And their redemptive hope. See, while the starting point for God's people is God's trustworthy Word, the main point of God's Word is God's saving Son.

[24 : 31] Paul wasn't just trying to prove that his interpretation of scripture was right and true, therefore worthy of belief. But that word here in verse 3 explaining, it can also be translated unfolding or revealing.

He was opening their eyes to the beauty of the content of the scriptures, revealing to them the main point of God's Word. The main point being, verse 3, that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed King that they'd always been waiting for.

And this wasn't just the main point. The main point also in verse 3, it's not just that Jesus was the Messiah, but that this Messiah, verse 3, had to suffer and rise from the dead. This was Paul's message.

The main point of God's Word. And it was a radical message if you think about it. How could it be, right? How could it be that the Messiah who would come and establish an everlasting kingdom of shalom?

How could it be that he had to suffer and taste death? And especially if this Messiah was somehow the Son of God, as Paul surely preached, how could it be that the Son of God had to suffer death?

[25 : 34] And oh man, you know I want to preach more on this, because this is the gospel. This is the gospel that the Son of God, who by his very divine nature never had to suffer, lovingly committed himself to do what he never had to do.

He had to suffer, not because of anything intrinsic in himself, not because he deserved it, but because of his great covenantal love for us, by which he committed himself to take on flesh and uphold the most insane promise of all time, to put death to death in his own body, to pay for our sins on a cross, sins not his own, sins of his undeserving yet somehow dearly loved people.

This is the gospel. This is the gospel. This is the main point of God's word. It's God's saving Son, the message of the unexpected Messiah who had to suffer and rise again, foreshadowed throughout all the scriptures, Jesus the Messiah, the suffering servant of Isaiah, the ultimate exiled Israelite, the cursed one hung on a tree, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Davidic King whose resurrection kingdom is imperishable.

This is what Paul was preaching in the synagogues from the scriptures, the saving Son of God. And guess what that kind of a message produced?

The message of a Messiah who doesn't just dominate for you, but wins by suffering for you, even through death, and then rises from the dead to an imperishable life. Let me tell you what that does, what it did there in Thessalonica, and what it continues to do today, and what I pray it does here at Christ Church in the East Bay.

[27 : 17] It establishes an upside-down kingdom. And this brings me to my conclusion, the end point of God's Son is God's kingdom. As Paul opened up God's word and revealed God's suffering Son, verse 4 says that a large number of not just Jewish people, but Greeks and prominent women, a socially and ethnically diverse group of people were persuaded, and they joined this new people of God.

And then the Jewish establishment and the common marketplace crowd, who were both quite content with the previous status quo social order, they got jealous, it says.

And they felt threatened by this new message and this new people, threatened by this new kingdom that disrupted their comfortable social order. So what did they do? They complained to the city officials.

Even these Jewish people who should have despised the kingdom of Caesar, they found common cause against the kingdom of God, against the kingdom of Jesus, and they complained that Paul was defying Caesar and proclaiming another king named Jesus.

And they accused Paul of causing trouble, it says, verse 6, causing trouble all over the world, or as some translations say, of turning the world upside down. And let me just end here by saying this.

[28 : 31] Christchurch, might it be so among us as well here in the East Bay? Might it be so amongst us as well? Would our commitment to the sure scriptures and our adoration of the saving son and our citizenship in his subversive kingdom so provoke this place that the most unlikely of people are united here in the name of Jesus?

and may every ruler in every corner of the kingdom of darkness jealously accuse us of turning the world upside down, as we are actually turning the world right side up by bearing faithful witness to the good news of the one true king, the crucified and risen Christ.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. As we sang this morning, what more could you say than to us that you have already said?

You have sent your son and you've given us your scriptures and you speak to us by your spirit and we love you for that. We especially love that you don't speak just words of truth and justice and righteousness, you don't speak words of condemnation, but you speak words of grace and hope and redemption to incredibly undeserving people like us.

We love that about you, God, and we ask that you would build your kingdom here, your subversive kingdom around this radical truth that the king of the world has died for his people.

[29 : 55] The king of the world who didn't have to committed himself so that he did have to because of his love for us. Transform us, we pray, Lord God. We pray all these things in the name of your son.

Amen.