

## Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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After having been released from prison in Philippi, Paul Silas journeyed southwest to the Greek city of Thessalonica. As Paul traveled through Macedonia Luke uses the pronouns “he” and “they” up to 16:10 where he then begins to use the personal pronoun “we,” in his narrative of Paul’s journeys. From Acts 16:10 to 21:15, Paul and his company of fellow travelers are identified as he, we, and they, depending on whether Luke was with Paul at the time. Luke’s association with Paul continues up to Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem. So, from here we have first hand information from Luke.

*Having gone through Amphipolis, and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was the synagogue of the Jews, 2 and as his custom was, Paul went in unto them, and for three Sabbaths he was reasoning [dialegomai – discoursing, speak through dialoging, engage in logical argumentation] with them from the Scriptures, 3 opening [dianoigo – to open the meaning through explanation, to open the mind, as in Luke 24:45] and alleging [paratithemenos – to place side by side as in a comparison or analogy] ‘That it was necessary for the Messiah/Christ to suffer and to rise again out of death, and this one is the Messiah/Christ; this Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you.’ 4 And certain of them were persuaded and were joined to Paul and to Silas, also of a great multitude of the godfearing Greeks, and of the principal women, not a few. 5 And the Jews, becoming jealous took certain evil men from the marketplace, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; they came to the house of Jason, and were seeking them to bring [them] to the people, 6 and not finding them they took Jason and certain brethren to the city rulers, shouting, “These that have turned the world upside-down have come here also, 7 whom Jason received; these are all in opposition to the*

*decrees of Caesar, acknowledging another as king saying [he is] Jesus," (Acts 17:1-7 my translation- MWL).*

### As His Custom Was (17:1-2)

*Having gone through Amphipolis, and Apollonia, they [Paul and Silas] came to Thessalonica, where there was the synagogue of the Jews, 2 and as his custom was, Paul went in unto them, and for three Sabbaths he was reasoning [dialegomai – discoursing, to engage in logical argumentation] with them from the Scriptures (17:1-2).*

As he did in the previous accounts, when Paul came to Thessalonica he searched out a Jewish synagogue. Verse 2 says, "as his custom was he went in unto them and reasoned with them from the Scriptures." The Jews call an exegetical presentation from Scripture a *drashah* if it was a lecture or presentation, and a *midrash* if it developed from an inquiry. The expression "as his custom was," suggests a pattern of behavior on the part of Paul. The terms Luke chooses to describe his evangelistic activity are enlightening, the word translated "reasoning" is *dialegomai* meaning, "to engage in the exchange of ideas; dialogue, discussion, or reasoning." This is one of the terms used repeatedly in the writings of Plato to describe the activity of Socrates. Paul's reasoning, however, was not Socratic discourse; it was from the Scriptures; which, in this context it would have most likely been from the Hebrew as translated by Paulo or from the Greek Septuagint. Paul appears to quote from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in his letters.

### Reasoning with Them from the Scriptures (Acts 17:3)

*... opening [dianoigo – to open the meaning through explanation, to open the mind, as in Luke 24:45] and alleging [paratithemenos – to place side by side as in a comparison or analogy], that it was necessary for the Messiah/Christ to suffer and*

*to rise again out of death, and this one is the Messiah/Christ; this Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you,' (17:3).*

These terms are even more descriptive of Paul's methodology in his evangelistic activity; but are of greater significance in that these words become a part of the vocabulary of early Christianity in describing the evangelistic and teaching activity of the church.

Luke says that Paul was "opening and alleging" that it was necessary for the Messiah/Christ to suffer. Here we have more specific insight into Paul's evangelistic approach. The term "opening" the Scriptures is the word used to describe Jesus activity with the two men on the road to Emmaus and later his disciples when he appeared to them in the upper room. In Luke 24:18, Jesus joined two of pilgrims walking from Jerusalem on the third day following his burial. They tell him of the recent events in Jerusalem and Jesus enters into a discussion with them explaining how what had happened was in fulfillment of the Scriptures (i.e. prophecies concerning the Messiah), how it was a part of God's plan for the salvation of mankind that the Messiah should die and rise again.

Luke says that beginning with Moses and from all the prophets he explained (*diermeneuo* - an early form of the word for hermeneutics) to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Later, after having recognized Jesus, as they were discussing what Jesus had done, they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us as he was speaking to us on the road and opening (*dianoigo* - to open in the sense of explaining the meaning of something, to open the mind to something) to us the Scriptures" (Luke 24:32)? Then later, in verse 44-47, he appeared to the apostles and did the same for them. Verse 45 says, "Then he opened their minds to an understanding of the Scriptures." The word "opened" is, again, the word *dianoigo* meaning he gave them insight, explanation of how he fulfilled the prophecies of the OT Scriptures.

The second word used here is *paratithemi* meaning "to place something along side something for comparison or analogy." What Paul was doing was placing the prophetic Scriptures along side the

fulfillment of these texts by Jesus and thus drawing the conclusion that the events in the life of Jesus were the very events that the Scriptures said would occur when the Messiah appeared. Again, we see that the major emphasis of the early church in their evangelistic activity was “the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.” Paul’s reasoning is very rabbinic:

*. . . because it had been foretold in Scripture that it was necessary for the Messiah/Christ to suffer (e.g. Isaiah 52:13-53:13; Psalms 22:6-18; Zech 59:10-12) and to rise again out of death (Psalms 16:9-10; 49:15; 110:1; Isaiah 26:15), this one is the Messiah/Christ; [i.e. the only one who meets the identifying characteristics of the Messiah, is the Messiah] this Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you,” (17:3).*

It is also of significance that the focus of Paul’s presentation or discussion was christological. One cannot set this emphasis aside and replace it with a doctrine of the church, a plan of salvation, moral issues, or eschatological events and claim to be practicing or restoring the Christianity of the first century.

### And Certain of Them Were Persuaded (17:4)

*And certain of them were persuaded and were joined to Paul and to Silas, also of a great multitude of the godfearing Greeks, and of the principal women, not a few (17:4).*

One of the major themes of Acts is the juxtaposition of belief and disbelief. The term juxtapose is appropriate in that it means both to comparison and contrast. Throughout the book of Acts belief and disbelief are played over against one another. The question of why some believed while others disbelieved makes for a very important study in Acts of Apostles, as is true of Luke’s first composition, the Gospel of Luke.

The word “believe” is a much more meaningful word in the *Koine’* Greek of the NT period than the idea of “an irrational leap” it

carries in our language. The verb “believe” is from the root word *peitho* meaning “to be persuaded, convinced, or assured of; essentially, to have certitude of mind.” The verb for believing is *pisteuo*, which is found in the NT in 248 occurrences. The Greek noun translated “belief” and “faith” is the same Greek word, *pistis*, which is found 244 times in the NT; indicating that it is a very dominant motif in the apostolic message.

Disbelief as contrasted with belief, is often found with the negative particle “not.” This is done with the use of the Greek letter “alpha prefixed to the word to be negated; e.g. *a-peitho* (to be unpersuaded or to believe not) or *a-pistis* (disbelief). The juxtaposition of “belief with disbelief” or as here in this text “to be persuaded” with “not being persuaded,” sets the consequence of belief in juxtaposition to the consequences of unbelief. In Acts of Apostles, belief is always associated with positive consequences where disbelief demonstrates itself in negative consequences, as is the case here in verses.

### These That Have Turned the World Upside-down (17:5-7)

*And the Jews, becoming jealous took certain evil men from the marketplace, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; they came to the house of Jason and not finding them [Paul and Silas] they took Jason and certain brethren to the city rulers, shouting, “These that have turned the world upside down have come here also, 7 whom Jason welcomed; they are all in opposition to the decrees of Caesar, acknowledging another as king, claiming [it is] Jesus,” (Acts 17:6-7 my translation- MWL).*

Here we see a repeated portrayal of the behavior associated with disbelief, the Jews became jealous and set out to prove the axiom, “when all reason fails, resort to violence!” They went into the marketplace or *Agora*, found certain men who are characterized as “evil,” worked them into a mob, and threw the city into a riot. Paul’s antagonists saw in him a threat to everything they were as the leaders of the synagogue, as the ones whose voice was the voice of

God to the people, and as those who saw themselves as the chosen of God. Paul was the apostle to the gentiles, who were to the elitist Jews unworthy of fellowship unless they were willing to convert to Judaism. What Paul was saying to these gentiles called godfearers that they were acceptable to God through belief in the Deliverer (the Messiah) God had sent to redeem the world. As far as these elitist Jews were concerned Paul and his associates were turning the (their) world upside down.

When their taste for blood was not satisfied by the mob activity they created they turned on Jason and certain others who had confessed their belief in this Deliverer Paul was proclaiming, they dragged them to the city elders with the hope of having them convicted of sedition against Caesar and the Roman Empire. Curiously, this is the same claim the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem made against Jesus of Nazareth, saying that he claimed to be one anointed as the son of god, which was one of the designations used in the Greco-Roman world for Caesar. In fact, in the Emperor Religion of the Roman Empire, Caesar was confessed as a god as he rode through the streets of a city, town, or village. The word for the visit of Caesar was called an epiphany (*epiphaneia* – an appearing), as in then appearing of a god.

## Application

There is a major emphasis here in this text on the role of the synagogue and the role of the Scriptures all synagogues possessed. In fact, one of the most popular terms among the Jews for the synagogue was *Ha Beth Sepherim* – “The House of Scrolls.” Whatever interest in the coming of the Messiah might have existed in these synagogues of the Diaspora, when Paul left them one can safely say that their messianic expectation was definitely awakened. In the days to follow the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, the rabbinic community became more ardent in their desire for a Messiah, but they looked for one came in the dress of a military deliverer.

In 123 AD, the leader of a band of guerillas was professed to be the Messiah by a large number of the Jewish people and some of the leaders of the newly formed Sanhedrin. Simon Bar **Kochba** was the kind of Messiah the Jewish leaders looked for at the time of Jesus; to them this desert fighter had the true signs of a Messiah. Bar **Kochba** led his guerilla forces in surprise attacks against the Romans from 123 to 135 AD, when the Roman had their fill of him the forces of Hadrian besieged his headquarters in **Bethar** and destroyed the Bar **Kochba** forces and every living person in **Bethar**. This was on the very day the Jews were commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem 65 years earlier.

The heralding of the coming of the Messiah by Paul raised the messianic expectation to a higher level than it enjoyed before. The major contributing cause of this was Paul and the early Jewish Christians' claims that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ "according to the Scriptures."

When Paul left the city he went west from Thessalonica then south to Berea in route to Athens. In Berea, "as his custom was," he searched out a synagogue of the Jews and announced to them that the Messiah had appeared in the land of Israel and he rooted his claims in the Scriptures and the eye witness testimony of those who had seen him alive after he had been put to death.

Luke is very impressed with the people of Berea; especially, their openness to the possibility of new revelation from God. "These were more noble," he writes, which literally means, "well-born," a word the Greeks used for a higher class of people. The reason for their nobility of mind, according to Luke, was that they "received the word with all readiness of mind (*prothumia* - with willingness), daily examining the Scriptures [to see] if these things were so. What things? The things we have seen from Paul throughout his evangelistic activities; all of which centered in the identity of Jesus and how, according to the Scriptures, he was the Messiah.

As a result of their examinations, many believed, of the Greeks, and women highly esteemed, and men, not a few. The word used

here to identify the women is *protos* (first) essentially it means a woman who is highly esteemed. We also see the mention of more and more Greeks, which probably includes both men and women.

Paul pointed them to the Scriptures and the power of God unto salvation, which was the story of God's redemption, the gospel (Rom 1:16). This is the same power we have available to us. The power is not in us; rather, it is in the story! If the power of God's story cannot lead one to faith, how can the one telling the story effect a greater power?

This is a reality we as modern day Christians must learn. If the story of God's redemption of the race of Adam will not turn the unbeliever, then all the programs, lures, attractions and entertainment venues will not accomplish what the story cannot. This is a reality the church of this age doesn't want to hear; thus, we keep emphasizing everything but the story or modifying the story so that it is hardly recognizable. Seeming success resulting from other appeals does not lead one to Christ but to the other appeals. When they lose interest in these attractions, they will search for other attractions. This has been the pattern of men and women of shallowness throughout history; those who are wise have recognized it, those who do not are doomed to repeat it.

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