

“A Tale of Two Cities”

Acts 17:1-15

Rev. Curtis J. Young

September 28, 2008

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This morning I have borrowed my sermon title, **A Tale of Two Cities**, from the famous novel by Charles Dickens, to draw attention to the most striking feature of our text.

Here Luke presents us with the sharpest contrast between the outcome of Paul’s ministry to synagogues in two cities, Thessalonica and Berea.

Both were Macedonian cities, both prosperous, separated by just fifty miles. Paul brought the same Gospel to both cities. He followed the same strategy in both cities, taking the Gospel first to the Jews. In both cities also, a large number of God-fearing Greeks and prominent Gentile women came to faith.

That’s where the similarities end. The contrast lay in the responses of the two synagogues to Paul’s ministry. In Thessalonica, Luke tells us (4) that “some of the Jews were persuaded,” while in Berea (12) “many of the Jews believed.”

In Thessalonica, most of the Jews became jealous after large number of the God-fearing gentiles “were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas.” (4)

So they recruited some rabble rousers, formed a mob, and started a riot. They went to grab Paul and Silas and throw them to the mob, but couldn’t find them. So they settled for dragging Jason and other new believers before the city officials, and falsely accused them of harboring traitors against Rome.

Verse 9 says the officials let Jason and others go after making them post bond. The English phrase may be too technical. The Greek phrase means that Jason and his friends had to pay a large sum of money as part of a promise. Most likely, they had to promised to have nothing more to do with Paul and his companions. That night, they helped Paul secretly to escape without being caught.

You might think that this would have exhausted the wrath of the Thessalonian synagogue, but it did not. When word reached them that many Jews were believing in Christ at Berea, the Thessalonians came and stirred up another mob, so that again Paul had to flee for his life.

In contrast with all this jealousy and rage, Luke says simply of the Bereans, “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (11)

There’s the contrast, and it is huge. The Bereans’ spirituality was characterized by a noble confidence in Scriptures. By this I mean they knew they could rely on them for guidance and truth from God, and so, they did. When Luke says they examined the scriptures daily for themselves, he used a judicial term of a judge examining a witness. They were eager to study them, to get all they could out of them.

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Honestly, I think a lack of confidence in the scriptures is expressed by a hesitation to ask questions, or to study the scriptures when we have questions.

The Bereans were a people who wrestled with the scriptures for understanding and insight. Perhaps they knew that to wrestle with them is to wrestle with God, and that's okay. In fact it is noble.

Paul would later write Timothy, every scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (II Tim. 16-17) The scriptures are not a holy knickknack. They are more like a wrench, a tool.

Perhaps Paul taught the Bereans this, too. But even not, they had the 19th Psalm and its great teaching on every scripture: law, statutes, precepts, commands, ordinances. They knew from it that the scriptures revive the soul, make wise the simple, give joy to the heart and light to the eyes; are pure, righteous, precious, certain, and sweet; warn us of error and confront us with our own hidden faults.

The conclusion of that Psalm is my prayer almost every Sunday. “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

I'm sure the Thessalonian synagogue also had a high view of the scriptures as God's word. But they did not rely on them. They were not confident in them. If you ask me how do I know, it is because their instinct was not to turn to them, to study them or rely on them for understanding and insight into what Paul was saying. They stirred up a mob instead, incited a riot, and spread lies.

The possession and reading of the scrolls were holy symbols of their religion, but they were not the substance of the faith they had.

I think back to Jesus' words to the Sadducees: “You error in not knowing the Scriptures or the power of God.” (Mk 12:24) They preserved them with great care, held them sacred, read them publicly, and followed the rituals, but had no confidence in the particulars. So for example, they denied the resurrection.

Obviously this raises the question: Are we more like the synagogue at Thessalonica or at Berea? You understand my point. Aside from expecting Scripture to be read on Sundays and preached, what role do they play in our thinking, in the way we live, in how we evaluate the claims that come our way about God, truth, religion, faith, morality. There are a lot of them.

Perhaps I should simply take a word from the description of the Bereans. What place do the Scriptures have in our lives daily?

Here is an insight into the scriptures that is not unique to me but is helpful as I think about why I can be confident in them. We are told of Jesus that “the Word became flesh.” Jesus was 100% God and 100% human by virtue of the incarnation. He assumed our humanity so he could be born in a cattle stall and raised in the conditions that we live in, to be with us in the day to day of our lives. Does the fact he was 100% human detract from his deity? Was he sinful? Of course not.

The scriptures similarly are God's word. By virtue, not of incarnation but inspiration, the written scriptures are 100% divine and 100% human. The scriptures as human do not detract from the scriptures

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as divine. They are no less of God, not less true because people wrote them. God revealed his word to us in this way so we would have immediate access to it in our lives, so we could leave our fingerprints on its pages and bring our questions there. For any question we have, they hold up just fine.

In the Old Testament, Solomon’s Temple came to be regarded as a kind of charm. As long as it was there, Judah was safe, but Judah was not safe. The presence of the Temple testified against Israel. They had such access to God but turned to idols instead.

If we don’t have the right confidence in the scriptures, the kind the Bereans had, we can easily slip into the wrong kind of confidence, which is presumption. As long as we have it, bring it to church, dust it off or turn it on as the case may be, hear it read and taught, God is on my side. God will bless. But all may not be well.

Last week I alerted you before the end of the sermon that I would be taking questions, and that it wasn’t a gimmick. This plays into what I am talking about. There certainly is a place for preaching and teaching without interruption or discussion. My point is, are we confident enough in the Scriptures to lay hold of them, to grapple with God’s word, so it lays hold of us?

Look with me earlier in our text, in verses 2-4. The noble way the Bereans responded to Paul’s ministry was the counterpart or complement to the noble way Paul ministered.

In verse 2, Luke tells us how Paul approached the Thessalonians, but as he tells us this was customary, it was how he approached the Bereans and others as well. Listen for the five potent verbs.

“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. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” he said.” Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas.

Reasoned is synonymous with “disputed,” “debated” and “preached”. It speaks of interaction, of people actively involved in listening and responding, of questions being asked, of points being raised.

“Explaining” literally is “opening.” Paul was opening the scriptures, point to verses, drawing attention to contexts, comparing passages.

“Proving” literally means placing alongside. Think of Paul going through all the things that took place with Jesus, from his birth to his resurrection, and then going through all the scriptures, from Moses to the prophets, that Jesus fulfilled.

This is how the scene appeared as Paul proclaimed Jesus. It was not a scene featuring an energetic preacher and passive listeners, but a people seriously engaged.

In the end some were persuaded. That means won over, convinced in their minds and hearts. Paul later wrote the Thessalonians, “for we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” (I Thess. 1:5)

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What I have just described to you is how that happened, and what that looked like. The scene Luke describes for us shows how the power was manifest, how the Holy Spirit worked, and how conviction came.

Let me close by offering a couple of reasons why it is so important that our confidence in the Scriptures is Berean.

This really is the fruit of God’s Spirit at work in our lives, and it is urgently necessary. The characterization of Christians as people who believe because they are ignorant, gullible, and refuse to think critically could not be farther from the truth, especially today.

We are in the midst of a terrible conflict. It involves unseen powers that hate God and his Christ, that influence the world and earthly powers to their ends. The conflict is seen in the clash of worldviews within our own culture.

Churches that are satisfied with clichés and pat answers are not going to be around very long. The environment is too hostile. Given the response to Paul’s ministry, not much has changed.

I love the phrase used to describe the Jews who did believe in Thessalonica. Luke says they joined Paul and Silas. Indeed, they joined them. This described the Bereans as well, and I hope it describes you.

God does not call you merely to believe the witness to Christ – the witness of the scriptures or the witness of the apostles. He calls you and me to join them, to become a witness ourselves. That is very different. It is greater. It is noble.

The confidence necessary for the calling to be a witness is not the result of asking few questions but many. It does not come in thinking little about Christ but thinking much. Or by coming to the scriptures casually and occasionally but earnestly and regularly.

And believers who do this, true witnesses, turn the world upside down.