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New Testament Evangelism *Acts 17 for Today*

Part 1

by Ian Hodge

Vv. 1-4. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

The beginning of Acts 17 finds Paul in Greece spreading the Gospel abroad to foreign nations. The fact that he is in Greece is of special interest to us because the similarities between ancient Greece and the modern world cannot be denied. The revival of ancient Greek philosophies in our day, although they do not always have their ancient name is as remarkable as it is unmistakable. Truly, there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9).

It is also interesting to find where Paul headed to carry out his evangelism. He went to the place where he would not only find people, but where he would be provided with the opportunity to speak. He went to the Synagogue. As was his custom might refer to his custom of using the Synagogue as a place for evangelism, or it might also mean that he went to the Synagogue because he followed the Jewish customs. Why he went is not as important to us as the fact that this is where the great evangelist headed in order to spread the Gospel.

Our passage tells us here that Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures. There are several questions that come to mind. How did Paul reason? How often did he reason? What did he reason? What was the effect of his reasoning? Let's consider these questions in turn.

First, how did Paul reason? Too easily we read our own social conventions into the Bible. Look at the events which followed his reasoning. Paul created an uproar wherever he went in Greece. This seems a reasonable conclusion, given the fact that he had to be secretly moved from place to place after his preaching episodes. It is apparent that Paul's reasoning was not some kind of polite "this is my idea, but you're welcome to your own view." Paul's reasoning had a dramatic impact on the people.

Second, how often did he reason? Paul was a Jew, although now he is a converted Jew. He knew that people met every Sabbath in the synagogue. So this is where he went. Also, a part of the activities at the synagogue involved providing people with an opportunity to speak. Jesus made use of this when He opened up the book of Isaiah and told the people that this prophecy was now fulfilled. Anyway, notice

that Paul made a *habit* of going to the synagogue to reason with the people.

Third, what did Paul reason? He argued from the Scriptures. Now if we're not careful, we can make a false conclusion about what is meant by the term "the Scriptures." It is certain that this term cannot mean the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments. Paul did not have the New Testament as we know it at this time. Paul used the Old Testament to argue that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Deliverer. More will be said later about what he preached as we follow Paul's argument on Mars Hill.

Fourth, now we see the effect of Paul's reasoning. Notice how many were persuaded: "a great multitude." How easily we can gloss over this comment without realising the full implications of it. Paul is here preaching from the Old Testament, not the New Testament. And see the results? A great multitude of people are persuaded to believe the truth about God and Jesus Christ. How easily we forget the power of the Old Testament Scriptures. We may not be the Apostle Paul, but I am certain that if we were to follow the great apostle's method of evangelism — using the Old Testament Scriptures — our evangelism would be much more effective.

Unfortunately, too many people have a distorted view of the Old Testament. Someone has said that the original Bible was the Old Testament and the New Testament is a commentary upon it. There is a certain truth about this. All the fundamental doctrines of the New Testament find their origin in the Old Testament.

Consider, though, the mistaken view many have now concerning the Old Testament. Some people make the religion taught in the New Testament a different religion than that taught in the Old. "We're New Testament Christians, they say." What should be our response to this? Our response should be this: "But we're whole Bible Christians." There is no such thing as New Testament Christianity or an Old Testament Christianity. To make such a distinction between the two testaments (or covenants) is to misread the Bible. There is only one religion, and it is taught consistently throughout the whole Bible. Maybe in our efforts to distinguish what we believe, in contrast to some of the sects and some parts of Christianity, we should place a sign at our church building saying "We're whole Bible Christians."

V. 5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

But there were other results from Paul's reasoning. While "a great multitude" believed, there was another crowd who were not persuaded. They created a serious problem for Paul and his friends. Too often this is what preaching does. Rather than simply minding their own affairs, people who are not persuaded by the truths of Christianity, become actively involved against the Faith.

Notice who the troublemakers were. Not the gentiles, the pagans, who may have had no knowledge of the Scriptures, but the Jews, God's chosen people. The Greeks were persuaded by Paul, but not the Jews. You might expect that the Jews would be persuaded before the Greeks. But this was not the case.

So too today, when the Scriptures are taught and explained, it is not the so-called Christian West which is persuaded, but the pagans in foreign lands. Back home, the so-called Christians, like the Jews of Paul's day, become troublemakers. They don't like what they hear from the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament. They're unhappy when they see that orthodox preaching persuades people to believe the Scriptures. So they become troublemakers. They have the government pass legislation to stop true Christians from doing what they believe God would have them do. For example, we've witnessed a number of court cases in Australia, and especially in the United States where it has been attempted to prevent God-fearing parents from fulfilling the obligations to teach their children the Christian faith in all subject areas. Or, as we've seen recently in Australia, people go to the courts of the land over women's ordination, hoping that the civil courts will overturn reasoned argument from the Scriptures. Like the Jews in Paul's day, this is an attempt to silence the true preaching of the Word of God.

Vv. 6-7 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king; Jesus."

Notice the effects of the preaching of St. Paul and his friends. They "turned the world upside down." Now we are often amazed when we read this. We don't see the world turned upside down by Christians today. Why not? I'd like to suggest an answer: It's because we don't use the Old Testament in the same way that the apostle Paul and the early Christians used it. But more about this later.

Here we have a very vivid description of the kind of message Paul and his colleagues were preaching throughout the world. These men were acting contrary to the decrees of the highest human authority at the time, Caesar. In his place they were teaching that there was another king, King Jesus. This, ultimately, was the complaint against Jason and his friends.

Now we know what it was that Paul and his friends were teaching from the Old Testament: *the absolute sovereignty of God*. There is *another* king, they said. He rules the world. All men and women everywhere are obliged to pay homage to Him. Refusal to do so will mean His ultimate judgement, if not in time then very definitely in eternity. In other words, the Christians were teaching *treason to the state*.

Ancient pagan states, such as the Roman Empire, just like our modern pagan states, such as Australia, did not believe there was any higher authority than themselves. Caesar is king. Today, parliament is supposed to be king. By king I mean that Caesar or parliament considers itself to be the highest authority; there can be no authority above Caesar or Parliament which people can appeal to. In other words, the parliament is considered the highest court of appeal.

Here's the reason why the Christians were attacked and banished by the Roman Empire. They were political subversives. This, however, might be described as a distinguishing mark of Christianity. Many other religions in the world do not teach that the political state must be disobeyed at times. This

is something unique to Christianity and the false religions which are perversions of Christianity.

Christianity, however, is a subversive religion. It is a treasonous religion, especially to those political states which hold to the idea that there is no higher authority than the state. Now this is the charge brought against the Christians in Thessalonica. They were charged with political crimes. They were not charged with holding false religious beliefs, but with subverting the power and authority of Caesar.

As Christians we are taught to obey those in authority over us. On the other hand, we are also taught that when authorities command things which are contrary to God's Word, it is better to disobey those authorities than bring down the wrath of God Almighty on us for our disobedience to His Word. In short, the Christian's allegiance is to King Jesus. No human institution which demands a similar loyalty can stand by while these truths are taught and practiced by Christians. And the Roman Empire of Paul's day is no different than the all-powerful political states in our own day.

Yet it is this message which turned the world upside down. If we want an explanation of what is wrong with much modern evangelism and why we do not see the dramatic events that followed Paul as he preached around the towns and cities of ancient Greece, we need look no further than the content of much of contemporary evangelism. It does not present Christianity in political terms. Too much modern preaching presents Christianity only in terms of personal salvation. Just as an insurance salesman offers fire insurance to protect against the event of fire, too many modern evangelists offer Christianity as an insurance policy against the flames of hell. While there is this aspect to Christianity, it is not the central doctrine of the faith. The absolute sovereignty of the Triune God is the central doctrine of the Bible, and unless that message is preached plainly we cannot expect to see the world turned upside down as it was in St. Paul's day.

V. 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things.

It is easy to see why these things troubled the rulers. They had a political crisis on their hands. Imagine what would happen in Australia if a great multitude of Australians began to swear allegiance to a foreign power? The politicians would be unhappy. They'd try to stop it. They would no doubt pass an act of parliament making it illegal for Australians to offer allegiance to this foreign power.

Here we see the reason why there have been recent laws passed to limit how Christians may teach their children. We may have our Christian schools, we are told, but our teaching must not be radically Christian. We are to make sure the content of our school curricula is comparable to the public schools — the very schools we're trying to prove have an inferior education. But we are expected to follow their inferior standards. In other words, they expect the Christians to maintain their allegiance to the politicians and what the politicians decree.

Until we see the events of the modern world in this context, we seriously underestimate the nature of the battle in which Christians find themselves. The argument over Christian education and Christian schools is not just an academic debate over quality education; ultimately it is an argument over the sovereignty of God, and who is to determine who shall educate the children and what they shall be taught. It is an argument over who is the highest authority: God or the parliament.

Vv. 9-10. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

We're not told what security they took. Whether it was money, or merely promises. But Jason and the other Christians were let go. Maybe a great multitude would not fit into the local prisons, so they had little choice but to let them go. Maybe they could not get a duly constituted law court to place

them in prison immediately. We are only told that they were let go.

Realising the nature of the battle, however, the local Christians made sure Paul and Silas escaped. But notice what Paul did as soon as he arrived in Berea: he went straight back into the Synagogue to begin persuading people from the Old Testament Scriptures once again. Now we've all heard of the perseverance of the saints, but this is another kind of perseverance. This is single-mindedness in achieving the goal of reaching the lost for Christ. It is also an example of how the great Apostle was not about to let the events of Thessalonica stop him from preaching and arguing from the Old Testament Scriptures.

V. 11. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Paul, however, received a different response here. The people in Berea were willing to read the Scriptures for themselves. They were not about to follow a crowd. They were independently minded. They'd find out for themselves.

Too many people today, unfortunately, are unlike the Bereans. They won't — or can't — make up their own minds. So, they follow the crowd. Some follow the multitude which are persuaded by Christianity. Others follow the crowds that condemn Christianity. They are followers, and they are identifiable by the fact that they are unwilling to pick up the Scriptures and find out for themselves whether these things are true. Curiously, despite the plethora of books that exist and the fact that we've had universal public education for over a 100 years, this century is marked by people who are unable to think for themselves. This is truly a sad state of affairs and a clear indication of the failure of universal public education. It is failing to have students think for themselves.

Vv. 12-13. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds.

Notice the hatred of the Thessalonican Jews was so intense they could not keep out of Paul's affairs. They were not content that he had to leave their own city. Now they'd stir up trouble in Berea as well. Such is sinful man's hatred of the God of the Bible. If he is not converted he will ultimately go to any lengths to show his hostility to God.

Vv. 14-15. Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

We should notice that although Paul was teaching about a new King, King Jesus, he never once felt obliged to pick up his sword and put the unbelieving Jews to death. No, he simply moved on to the next town, this time to Athens. In contrast to the Jews from Thessalonica who were willing to use the political authorities to enforce their hatred against Christians, St. Paul responded by simply packing his bags and moving on. He apparently did not feel in any way obliged to stay in a town when he was unwanted.

V. 16. Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

Here is a description of Paul's reaction to the situation that greeted him in Athens. He saw the pagan Greeks worshipping false idols. He saw that the Greeks had many gods. Now a god is simply that which people consider the highest authority in their lives. The Greeks were renowned for their gods, but all their gods permitted them only one luxury: the people

could really be their own god, making up their own rules and regulations. This, after all, is what the Bible tells us is man's rebellion, becoming his own god (Gen. 3:5).

But it is not only what he observed that should occupy our attention, but the fact that "his spirit was provoked within him" by the circumstances which he observed. Today, in Australia, we have a great amount of worship of false idols. These may not be visible idols, but this makes them no less real. And what is our response? Do we ignore these false idols? Are we, like the Apostle Paul, provoked into action by the false religious practices we see around us?

Recently, Sydney witnessed again the Homosexual Mardi Gras. And what are the Christians doing about this? Many professing Christians are unfortunately sitting around saying that all people are entitled to their beliefs, as long as they don't hurt anyone else. This, however, is not the view that the Apostle had when he arrived in Athens. Rather, he saw that these false religions were a denial of the sovereignty of God, and he would do everything in his power to *persuade* the people to obey God rather than man. He would attempt to convince them to live by God's standards rather than making up a set of rules of their own.

V. 17. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.

The first thing we notice here is that Paul was not content to confine his activities to the synagogue. He went into the marketplace also and again reasoned with the Jews and the gentiles. Notice how often he did it: daily.

Many people would consider that Paul had "gone overboard on religion." You can imagine their comments. "Why don't you get a regular job," many would say. "Leave these people alone. They have their beliefs, and you have yours," others would add. "Stop being so egotistical to think that your religion is the only true religion." "Paul, don't you know that it is impossible to know such things as you describe. Everyone's going to heaven, and if these Jews and Gentiles are doing no one any harm, why not accept their religious beliefs as being genuine and leave them alone. After all, sincerity is all that is important in religion. It is sincerity that will keep a man or a woman out of hell."

Some people would describe St. Paul as a fanatic. While this is meant pejoratively, it should be taken as a compliment. The trouble with too many so-called Christians today is that they are fanatical about nothing. They have no great and burning desire to uphold the truths of Christianity, especially the one we've seen that turned the world upside down: the sovereignty of God.

What we need today in the world is more fanatical Christians who, like the apostle Paul, are provoked when they see godlessness and paganism around them. We need men and women who are fired with a passion for turning the world upside down; who will, at every opportunity, reason from the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to convince people of the truthfulness of Christianity.

More importantly, however, we need fanatical Christians who understand that the Christian message is a totalitarian message. It is impossible to serve two masters, said our Lord. Therefore, we need Christians whose unflinching loyalty is to the sovereign God of Scripture, the God who created all things and demands that all His creatures give Him his rightful place in their lives as Lord and Master. If this is fanaticism, then so be it.

In the next issue we'll look specifically at the message that St. Paul delivered to the Athenians at the Areopagus.

(To be continued)

Reconstruction Book Club

After seven years of unchanged prices, we regret it is necessary to increase the membership fee for the Reconstruction Book Club. Increased postal rates are the main cause of substantial price increases in our operating expenses. Australia Post has been slowly eliminating the cheaper postal rates available to registered publications. We've increased the rate from \$35 to \$45 per annum minimum donation for book club membership. The rate is the same for local or foreign subscribers.

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We are grateful to all those who support our work and make possible the regular publication of the newsletters. Our continued prayer is that our ministry will equip God's people for effective service in the army of the King of kings. Your financial and prayer support make this possible.

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This is a reminder to subscribers to plan now to attend our 10th anniversary and hear R.J. Rushdoony and Otto Scott. Arrangements are well underway, although we're hoping to add a few "extras" so that you can all get the chance to meet and hear Dr. Rushdoony and Mr. Scott on more occasions. For example, we're planning a "Chalcedon breakfast." This is where you get the chance to have breakfast with staff members of Chalcedon and discuss your favourite topics in an informal manner.

We have been able to organise a special conference price at the Bankstown International Hotel. Accommodation will be available if required at very reasonable rates. We've done our best to arrange a deal which will give you the lowest possible costs, while at the same time providing a suitable venue for our birthday dinner and conference. We believe you'll be impressed with the quality of the service at the Bankstown International – and even more impressed with the rates we've obtained for those who require a place to stay while in Sydney. Accommodation will be approximately \$52.00 per head, including bed and breakfast, on a twin share basis. If you have a family, the price is even better, since we've arranged a room rate, not a per person rate. You'll only pay a little extra for breakfast for additional people in the room. Bring your swimmers; there's an indoor salt water pool. And if you're a fitness freak, the gym will be available day and night.

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