

# HOLD IT UP TO THE LIGHT

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.



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Acts 17:1-15

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*Acts 17:1-15*

When I was an intern at a church in Idaho, I traveled to Bulgaria with one of the elders of the church to teach the Scriptures in churches there.

After one of his sermons, Harden entertained questions from the congregation. One woman, out of the blue, asked if it's permissible to pray for prisoners. I imagined how I would answer the question and thought I'd say something like, "Of course it's okay to pray for prisoners. It's okay to pray for anyone." Not Harden. He said, "Turn to Hebrews 13:3." He waited for everyone to turn to the verse, and then he read, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body." I thought, "Wow!"

The man knew his Bible. Today we will meet some people who also knew the Scriptures. They will inspire us not only to learn the Scriptures but also to use the Scriptures in a helpful way.

## What kind of king?

Acts 17:1-4:

**When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 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. 4 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.**

Note the words associated with Paul's evangelistic efforts in Thessalonica. The word translated "reasoned" is related to the English word "dialogue." Paul isn't lecturing; he is both speaking and listening—and responding to what he's hearing. The word translated

"explaining" means to "open up." Paul isn't beating them over the head with the truth; he's opening them up to new possibilities. The word translated "proving" means to "place beside" and was used of placing food in front of people. Paul isn't cramming something down their throats; he's inviting them to a spiritual feast.

Paul reasons with these people from the Scriptures, which makes sense, because he was speaking to people in a Jewish synagogue who would have been familiar with Scriptures—that is, the Hebrew Scriptures. His goal is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the ultimate Jewish king whom the Scriptures anticipated. In order to do that, Paul has to first show them that it was "necessary" for the Christ to both suffer and rise from the dead.

Jews by and large didn't believe that the Christ needed to suffer; they believed that the Christ needed to triumph. They didn't expect the Christ to be arrested by Jewish leaders and crucified by Roman leaders. A crucified Christ was a contradiction in terms. Some Jews expected the resurrection for all at the end, but no one expected a one-off resurrection of the Christ before the end. Therefore, Paul has some work to do.

Even though the Jews had no category for a one-off resurrection, telling them about a one-off resurrection is the only way to persuade them to create a category for a crucified Christ. There's no way they would believe in a crucified Christ unless they first believed in a resurrected Christ. The resurrection of Jesus vindicates him as the Christ. Paul creates new categories for the Christ—actually, they were always God's categories—and shows how Jesus fills those categories. If the Jews expected a triumphant Christ, then Jesus was even more triumphant than what they expected for the Christ, for he triumphed over death!

Luke doesn't tell us specifically how Paul used the Scriptures. Paul would have plenty of passages to choose from. Moreover, the biblical story as a whole, with chapters of slavery and release, exile and return, disaster and reversal, suffering and vindication—for humanity, for Israel, and for certain people in Israel, particularly Moses and even more particularly King David—anticipates a crucified and resurrected Christ.

Paul says, based on the Scriptures, that it was “necessary” for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead. Why? Because of evil: Satan, sin, and death. Jesus triumphed over evil in his death and resurrection, and he shares his victory with all who give their allegiance to him.

## How it might have looked

In order to show the Thessalonians that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, we might imagine Paul scrolling to Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song, Isaiah 52:13-53:12, and reading from Isaiah 53:5: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; / he was crushed for our iniquities; / upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, / and with his wounds we are healed.”

We might imagine the Thessalonians countering, “Yes, of course, the prophet was talking about us, Israel.” They might have scrolled to Isaiah’s second Servant Song, Isaiah 49:1-13, and read from verse 3 to show Paul that the Lord himself identifies Israel as the servant of the Lord: “He said to me, “You are my servant, / Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.””

We might imagine Paul responding, “Yes, but has the Lord been glorified in Israel?” He might advise them to keep reading in Isaiah 49 until they came to verse 6: “I will make you as a light for the nations, / that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. ” He might say, “Has Israel been that light? Has Israel brought the Lord’s salvation to the end of the earth?”

Paul might then scroll to Isaiah’s first Servant Song, Isaiah 42:1-9, and observe in verses 6 and 7 that the Lord called Israel, as “a light for the nations,” to “open eyes that are blind.” He might keep reading until he came to Isaiah 42:19, where the Lord says, “Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send?” He might say, “How can Israel, which is blind, open blind eyes?”

We might imagine Paul concluding with something like this: “The Lord made a covenant with Israel to be the light to the nations, but Israel kept the light to itself and even turned its back on the light. Nevertheless, the Lord was faithful to his covenant, blessing the world through Israel in that the vocation of Israel was fulfilled by one faithful Israelite, the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. He has succeeded where Israel failed. Jesus said, ‘I am the light of the world’ (John 8:12).’ He has brought the Lord’s salvation to the end of the earth. Can you see?”

Paul reaches “some” Jews but even more Gentiles: “a great many” Greeks who had already been drawn to the God of Israel and “not a few” Gentile women of prominence. Not everyone in Thessalonica was pleased with Paul and Silas, however.

## Turning the world right-side up

Acts 17:5-9:

**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. 6 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, 7 and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” 8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.**

Although some Jews believed, others were “jealous” because some of their countrymen and many Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogue “joined” Paul and Silas. So great is their concern that they’re willing to form a mob of “wicked men of the rabble” in order to overpower any resistance and apprehend Paul and Silas, who were staying at the house of someone named Jason. Failing to locate Paul and Silas, the jealous Jews take out their wrath on Jason and others who have begun following Jesus.

The accusation against Paul and Silas is that they have “turned the world upside down.” Paul and Silas, who aren’t present to defend themselves or the gospel, might counter that they were trying to turn the world right-side up. After all, Jesus, in his death and resurrection, defeats evil.

The accusation against “all,” which also includes Jason and other new believers in Thessalonica, is that they are “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” The jealous Jews are partly right. Indeed, there is another king. Indeed, his name is Jesus. He calls the world and its rulers to account, including Caesar, the greatest ruler of them all. But Jesus is a different kind of king. He doesn’t advocate the

overthrow of Caesar. In fact, he said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17). Two of his apostles, Paul and Peter, will urge his followers to submit to governing authorities (Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13).

Such is the jealous Jews’ antipathy for Paul and Silas that they’re not only willing to form a mob of wicked men to apprehend them, they’re also willing to appeal to the Gentiles for justice. In this way, they’re like the Jewish leaders who handed Jesus over to the Romans, and like the crowd of Jews who told Pilate, the Roman governor who was considering the fate of Jesus, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

## Another king

The rulers of this world will make their claims, but for us, there is another king, a ruler who rules the rulers, and his name is Jesus. He calls all the rulers of this world to account. To him, every knee will bow. Those of us who have given our allegiance to Jesus bow down to him even now.

Jesus is a different kind of king. He suffered on the cross and rose from the dead to defeat evil. Therefore, his reign, in contrast to that of other rulers, is entirely benevolent. He is completely lacking in self-interest.

Our candidates promise what they’re going to do for us, how they’re going to make our world better. Many of them, perhaps, are good-hearted. None of them, however, will tell us what is true for all of them: that they are running to satisfy some need in themselves. Unlike the rulers of this world, Jesus does not rule in order to satisfy some need in himself, as if he had to prove himself to himself and others. No, he rules entirely for the sake of others.

Our king heals the world.

When we have the opportunity to tell people in our world about our king, we would do well to learn from Paul. Instead of lecturing people, listen to them. Instead of beating them over the head, open them up to new possibilities. Instead of cramming something down their throats, invite them to a spiritual feast.

Bring the healing love of Jesus to the world. Turn the world right-side up.

Paul and Silas meet with a different kind of response in the next city they visit.

## Noble Jews

**Acts 17:10-15:**

**As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. 11 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. 12 As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.**

**13 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. 14 The believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. 15 Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.**

In Berea, Paul and Silas enter a synagogue of the Jews, just as they entered a synagogue in Thessalonica, but they meet different kinds of Jews who responded differently. Luke calls the Jews of Berea more “noble” than the Jews of Thessalonica.

The nobility of the Jews of Berea, in contrast to certain jealous Jews in Thessalonica, is seen in that they receive the word—that is, the Gospel—with eagerness. They are eager to hear Paul and Silas, not eager to judge them. That doesn’t mean that they immediately and indiscriminately believe Paul and Silas, however. On the contrary, they delve into the Scriptures to see if what Paul and Silas were saying holds up.

In fact, they examined the Scriptures daily, on an ongoing basis. The word translated “examining” was used as a legal term: the Bereans examine the Scriptures for evidence concerning the validity of what Paul and Silas were saying. Their nobility is seen not only in their eagerness to listen but also in their disposition to evaluate what they listen to by intently examining the Scriptures. Paul had reasoned with the Thessalonians from the Scriptures; now the Bereans examine the Scriptures.

What Paul and Silas told those in the synagogue bears up under examination, because many of them believe the Gospel. Note that “many” of the Berean Jews “believed” the Gospel in contrast to “some” of the Thessalonian Jews who were “persuaded” to join Paul and Silas. In Berea, eager reception and daily examination leads to a greater commitment. Just as in Thessalonica, the gospel also makes significant inroads among Gentiles.

However, the jealous Jews from Thessalonica get wind of the goings-on in Berea, stir up the crowds, just as they stirred up the crowds in Thessalonica, so Paul has to get out of town again. Indeed, the Jews of Berea were “more noble than those in Thessalonica.”

## What feels right

Today, we hear more and more things from more and more sources. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion and now feels obligated to share it on the Internet. Moreover, many people have no qualms about stretching the truth or even disseminating outright lies over the Internet. With hundreds of millions Americans connected over the Internet, anyone, clueless or not, can pass on what they like with a click, whether it’s true or not.

What’s true? What’s false? How do you evaluate what you hear? What do you believe?

We live in a world of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” We live in what people are calling a “post-truth” world. In fact, the word “post-truth” was selected by Oxford Dictionaries as the 2016 Word of the Year because of its popular usage. The word sounds as if we used to believe in such a thing as truth but do no longer. The Oxford Dictionaries, however, offer a more nuanced definition: “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Increasingly, women and men in our world appeal to their feelings.

Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith conducted in-depth interviews with two hundred and thirty young adults from across the United States concerning their moral lives. This response was typical: “I mean, I guess what makes something right is how I feel about it. But different people feel different ways, so I couldn’t speak on behalf of anyone else as to what’s right and wrong.”<sup>1</sup> The problem, Smith emphasized, isn’t so much with the young adults as with the schools, institutions, and families who haven’t given them the resources to cultivate their moral intuitions.

Malcolm Muggeridge, that old British sage from the twentieth century, was right: “It has been said that when human beings stop believing in God they believe in nothing. The truth is much worse: they believe in anything.” Indeed, when people appeal solely to their feelings, they are susceptible to believing in anything.

## Learn the Scriptures

Those of us who believe in Jesus, however, appeal first not to our feelings but to the Scriptures. Like the Jews of Berea, we take what we hear and evaluate it in light of the Scriptures. Thank God that he has not left us at the mercy of our feelings. Thank God that he’s given us the Scriptures. Of course, if we are to evaluate what we hear in light of the Scriptures, it helps to know the Scriptures.

At this church, we practice “expository preaching”: our sermons are mostly based on a specific biblical text. One reason for preaching in this way is that people learn the Scriptures week by week and thereby become better equipped to evaluate what they hear in light of the Scriptures. Another reason is that we believe that the word of God is authoritative, not the preacher. If a preacher comments on a specific text, you are in a better position to judge for yourself whether what he or she says aligns with that text. A preacher may be gifted, but a preacher is not inspired. Even at my best, I am still a flawed interpreter and preacher. (Please don’t agree too heartily!)

During one of his sermons in Bulgaria, Harden told the church of new believers, “If what I say doesn’t agree with what you see in the Scriptures, then you should throw me out of here.” So today I say to you, if what I say doesn’t agree with the Scriptures . . . restore me in a spirit of gentleness lest you too be tempted! (Galatians 6:1)

By preaching expository sermons, we hope to nourish a church of Bereans who are “independently dependent on the Lord,” in the words of David Roper, a former pastor of this church.

That’s not to say that we don’t also preach topical sermons, which feature a collection of texts, in an effort to understand what God may be saying about a specific topic, but we take care to ensure that we understand the contexts from which the texts emerge so that we’re not cherry-picking to prove a preconceived point. Expository sermons are the staple of our diet. We supplement them with topical sermons.

Of course, our sermons are no substitute for your study. We hope, through our preaching, to encourage personal reading, study, and reflection, both on your own and in small groups. As it was for the Bereans, so it is for us: a daily examination of the Scriptures leads to a greater commitment to Christ.

And when you read the Bible, remember that you're reading a story. As with any story, certain earlier chapters help get you to the present chapter but no longer apply in the way that they once did. Take circumcision, for example. Biblically, the rite of circumcision goes from a sign of the covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures to unnecessary in the book of Acts to ill-advised in the book of Galatians.

## Evaluate what you hear

What approach can we take to what we hear from the culture in which we live? One approach would have us reject everything from the culture. The opposite approach would have us absorb everything from the culture.

The apostle Paul, on the other hand, says this to the Philippians: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9).

The list of virtues in verse 8 comes mostly from the Greco-Roman world in which the Philippians lived. They are to "think about"—or take into account—these things from the culture that are in agreement with the Scriptures.

In short, our approach to culture should be a balanced one. Paul encourages us to evaluate culture in a discriminating way, to neither discard nor adopt everything our culture espouses but to hold everything up to the light of the Scriptures, the way a cashier holds up a bill to the light to see if it's genuine. We can therefore look out on our culture and see that in at least some ways, it presents and values some things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable.

## God is calling to us

After coming to Christ as a teenager up until about twenty years ago, I can't remember hearing any sermons that had anything to do with caring for the environment. In fact, I heard some believers saying that we shouldn't care for the environment at all because Jesus was coming back soon and the world was going to be destroyed. On the other hand, growing up in California, I heard lots of people outside the church urging us to care for the environment. Did God create the world and place us in it in order for us to exploit it and destroy it?

In Genesis 2, caring for creation is the first command God gives to the man: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Paul tells us that creation is waiting for humans to fulfill their vocation to care for creation: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21).

What many people outside the church were saying was confirmed for me by the Scriptures, even if they were ignorant of the Scriptures, even if some of them went beyond the Scriptures, and even if some of them went way beyond the Scriptures in that they worshiped creation. Paul says that men and women "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). Care for the environment: the Scriptures say yes. Worship the environment: the Scriptures say no.

We can take in art, literature, music, and films and find in them the themes that the Scriptures featured long ago. In fact, often times secular artists feature those themes in more compelling ways than so-called Christian artists, in part because secular artists don't feel bound by fitting everything into some preconceived package suitable for a "Christian" audience.

In my men's groups, we watch films for signs of the Gospel and then discuss what we've watched afterward. At times, when I'm driving in the car with my daughters, I will turn on a pop music station, which mostly plays . . . well, let's be generous and call them love songs. I encourage us all to listen to the words. Some of the words are inspiring. Probably most of the words: not so much. But here's what we glean from much of pop music: the singers are pining for something that they can only find in Christ. So, sure, listen to pop music if you like—but do so in a discriminating way.

God is calling to us, not only through the Scriptures but also through the culture in which we live. Yet not all of it is from God, of course. We let in only what is from God, and the Scriptures serve as our sifter. Looking out on our culture, evaluating it in light of Scriptures, and allowing the good things to touch our hearts can actually motivate us to put the things of the Scriptures into practice.

When the Israelites left Egypt and its pagan culture, they took with them gold and silver, with which they built the tabernacle (Exodus 12:35-36). They didn't take everything, but there was something good there that could be used to build something great for God.

## **Let the good stuff in**

The Bereans learned the Scriptures and knew the Scriptures. They could, therefore listen to what they heard in a discriminating way. They could discern what to let in and what to discard, what to believe and what do disbelieve. They heard something new, something foreign, something from outside their synagogue: they heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It turns out that this new thing was the best thing anyone's ever heard. They let it in. They let Jesus in.

Learn the Scriptures. Hold up what you hear to the light of the Scriptures. Let the good stuff in.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Smith, Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford University Press. 2011.