

TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN

SERIES: *SENT: LIVING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.*



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Acts 28:15-31
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Acts 28:15-31

In 2007, David Kinnaman published what was considered a groundbreaking study called *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*. It was the result of three years of extensive interviews with young adults. In short, Kinnaman discovered that young adults outside the church have a negative perception of people inside the church. In particular, they believe that we are hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, anti-gay, too sheltered, too political, and judgmental.¹

Makes we wonder if they think we're doing anything right.

The church does not enjoy the best reputation in the United States these days, perhaps especially around here, where people shun the church in droves. Well, the church didn't enjoy a good reputation in the apostle Paul's day, either, especially among Jews. In fact, some Jews specifically told Paul that the church was held in low esteem "everywhere," as we'll see today.

Is there anything we can do?

We pick up the story in the book of Acts when Paul is on his way to stand trial before Caesar in Rome. Luke, who was traveling with Paul, tells the final chapter of his story.

To the end of the earth

Acts 28:15-16:

And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. 16 And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him

Paul wrote what we call Romans, his letter to the church in Rome, almost two years earlier. In that letter, he wrote that he wanted to visit the Roman believers. Now, finally, he's on his way to Rome, though not as he had hoped: he's coming to Rome in chains to stand trial before Caesar. Nevertheless, he had wanted to visit the Romans in part for the sake of mutual encouragement, and when they treat him like an honored dignitary by journeying to the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns, forty-three miles and twenty-one miles from Rome, respectively, Paul takes courage. Likewise, we can encourage others by coming to their side in difficult times.

At the outset of the book of Acts, the risen Lord Jesus told his first followers in Jerusalem that they would be his witnesses "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). From the perspective of Jerusalem, Rome qualifies as the end of the earth. The Lord's word to Paul has been fulfilled: "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome" (Acts 23:11).

When he gets to Rome, Paul wants to meet with fellow Jews.

Paul explains himself

Acts 28:17-22:

After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, "Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18 When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. 19 But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. 20 For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain."

21 And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. 22 But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.”

In some cities, some Jews have opposed both Paul and the Gospel, creating uproars. By explaining himself to Jewish leaders, Paul hopes to avoid a similar fate in Rome, not least for the sake of the reputation of the Gospel. Paul’s Jewish opponents in Jerusalem have delivered him over to the Romans, though Paul maintains his innocence. Even so, he has no charges to bring against his Jewish opponents. Indeed, he is not against the Jews in any sense. He is a Jew!

On three occasions Paul has spoken of “hope” in connection with the resurrection of the dead, even claiming that he was on trial for having such a hope (Acts 23:6, 24:15, 26:6-8). Now, he tells the Jews in Rome that he is on trial for “the hope of Israel.” Paul believes in the resurrection of the dead—that is, the future resurrection of God’s people. He also believes that God has already raised one man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel, in advance of the future resurrection of all God’s people. From Paul’s perspective, the hope of Israel—indeed, the hope of the world—is based on the resurrection of Israel’s Messiah.

Although some Jews in Jerusalem have leveled charges against Paul, the Jews in Rome are not aware of such charges. However, they are aware of what they consider to be a Jewish “sect” constituting followers of Jesus, and what they have heard isn’t likely to make any of them favorably disposed. Although Paul has no charge to bring “against” his nation, certain members of his nation have spoken “against” the church everywhere.

The Jewish leaders wanted to hear Paul’s views, so Paul tells them.

The Law and the Prophets

Acts 28:23-24:

When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both

from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. 24 And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

Luke began the book of Acts with this description of Jesus: “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). He concludes with two references to the kingdom of God, one here, in (Acts 28) verse 23, and the other in verse 31, his last sentence. His two final references to the kingdom are immediately followed by references to Jesus, whom both Luke and Paul believe to be the Messiah, the final Jewish king.

To the Jews in Rome, Paul testifies about the kingdom of God—now advanced through the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, or king, who is now also Lord of the world. Likewise, Philip “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). The Gospel, or Good News, concerns the victory of the kingdom of God over the kingdom of evil (Acts 26:18).

Paul turns to the Law and the Prophets, which mark the beginning and end of the Hebrew Scriptures, respectively. The Law and the Prophets—the Hebrew Scriptures—tell a story, which anticipates a climax in the coming of the Messiah.

Paul’s testimony meets with a mixed response, as anticipated by Simeon in his words to Mary: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). Likewise, Jesus himself, in the parable of the sower, expected an uneven response to “the good news of the kingdom” (Luke 8:1-8).

The Gospel is a story

It’s popular these days to speak of “narratives.” Everyone, every group, every company, and every movement, it seems, has a narrative and wants to convince us of its validity. The secular West has a narrative that climaxes with the advent of the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe, when faith in humanity supposedly triumphed over faith in God. As believers in Jesus Christ, we too have a narrative, not simply concerning the West but concerning the whole world, going all the way back to the beginning.

The Scriptures, beginning with the Law, continuing through the Prophets, and culminating in the New Testament, are a narrative. If the Enlightenment narrative features the victory of humanity, the biblical narrative features the victory of God. Although the Enlightenment narrative features the victory of humanity over God, the biblical narrative does not feature the victory of God over humanity. Rather, it features the victory of God over evil—for the sake of humanity! Whereas the Enlightenment story climaxed in 18th century Europe when certain thinkers rose to prominence, the biblical story climaxed in 1st century Palestine when a certain Jew rose from the grave.

If the Enlightenment managed to displace faith in God, then other gods, such as money, sex, and power, have rushed in to fill the void, with devastating consequences. Even many of those who have managed to prosper without faith in God find themselves in the throes of existential despair, having everything they need but nothing they want.

Garrison Keillor observes, “Stripped of the Christian narrative, we gaze out on a landscape that, while fascinating, offers nothing that one could call Hope.”²

Oh, do we have a story for you! The Gospel is not only a proclamation (Jesus is Lord); it’s also a story.

God, overflowing with love, created humans to know him and reign over his world, but they didn’t want to reign under him, so they rebelled against him, thereby opening the door for evil to enter the world. Instead of giving up on humanity, God partnered with one people, Israel, to bless the world, but Israel, like the first humans, rebelled against him. God, in his relentless love to restore humanity, was not deterred, and he sent one faithful Israelite, Jesus Christ, who defeated evil in his death and resurrection. If the first humans opened the door for evil, Christ opened the door for humanity to be restored to God through faith in him. Now, reigning over the world as Lord of the world, Jesus is subduing evil, not least by sending his Spirit-empowered followers into the world. When he returns and establishes his eternal kingdom, God will vanquish evil. Humanity will be restored to know God and reign over his new world forever.

It’s a story of hope, is it not?

The Gospel is a story. The Gospel also exposes hearts.

Dull hearts

Acts 28:25-28:

And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:

**26 “Go to this people, and say,
“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”**

**27 For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed;
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’**

**28 Therefore let it be known to you
that this salvation of God has been sent to the
Gentiles; they will listen.”**

Although the Holy Spirit spoke to the people of Isaiah’s day through the prophet, Paul understands that the Spirit is also speaking to the people of his day through the same text. Originally, God commanded Isaiah to tell the people, “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; / keep on seeing, but do not perceive,” and he commanded the prophet, “Make the heart of this people dull, / and their ears heavy, / and blind their eyes” (Isaiah 6:9-10). Notice that what was expected in Isaiah has come to pass in Acts. Isaiah, by preaching the truth, would “make the heart of this people dull,” and Paul says “this people’s heart has grown dull.”

What’s happening with the Jews of Paul’s day? They have a perception problem. More to the point, they have a heart problem. They have heard the truth, but because their hearts have grown dull, they don’t believe it. In the end, because they have resisted the truth for so long, they can’t believe the Gospel: they can’t “turn” to God and allow him to “heal” them. What Simeon said at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke is true: the “thoughts from many hearts” have been “revealed” (Luke 2:35).

Paul expects Gentiles to be more favorably disposed to the Gospel. Indeed, we have already seen this pattern play out in the book of Acts: Jews mostly closed their hearts to the Gospel while Gentiles opened their hearts to it. If we ask why the Jews were resistant, the answer the

book of Acts gives is that many of them were offended by Paul's contention that their God was reaching out to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21-22).

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord told the Servant of the Lord, who turns out to be Jesus:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the
earth (Isaiah 49:6)

In Romans 11, Paul says that Israel's rejection of the Gospel has a positive, two-fold effect. First, salvation comes to the Gentiles. Second, Gentile response to the Gospel provokes Jews to be jealous and thereby open to the Gospel.

The Gospel exposes hearts

The writer of Hebrews says this about the Gospel: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12-13). As a sword would expose the previously unseen internal workings of the body, the Gospel exposes the previously unseen internal workings of the heart—one's thoughts and intentions, whether one is open to submitting to Jesus or closed to submitting to Jesus.

Unbelief is not fundamentally an intellectual issue; it's fundamentally a moral issue. In their minds, people don't believe the Gospel because of intellectual objections. In their hearts, people don't believe the Gospel because they don't want anyone telling them what to do. They want to decide for themselves what to do with money, sex, and power. To put it crassly, they want to have sex with whomever they want.

Ah, but what do we see in Acts? If those who should be open to the Gospel (Jews) reject it, then those who shouldn't be open to it (Gentiles) accept it. A similar phenomenon is playing out in our day. The so-called "Christian West" has largely rejected the Gospel, which is now making phenomenal inroads in the so-called Third World. Now believers in the Third World, seeing how we're in the throes of money, sex, and power, want to send missionaries to us!

Indeed, just as God designed Gentile acceptance of the Gospel to provoke Jewish jealousy, Third World acceptance of the Gospel can make the West jealous. Indeed, when I have traveled to such places to teach the Scriptures to churches and pastors, I find myself being envious of their passion for the Gospel. I tell them, "We have the knowledge, so maybe that's why God lets us come and teach you. But you have the passion. We need you every bit as much as you need us."

The Gospel is a story, and the Gospel exposes hearts. The Gospel also triumphs in unexpected ways.

They can't imprison the message

Acts 28:30-31:

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance

Despite being rejected by Jews and imprisoned by Romans, Paul continues to herald the victory of the kingdom of God, which has come about through the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus. Notice the titles that Luke attaches to Jesus at the end of Acts. He is "Lord," a title that Caesar, the Roman king, used. In Rome, the seat of Caesar's power, Paul preaches that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. Jesus is also the "Christ," the Jewish king. The Jewish king upstages the Roman king, and the kingdom of Rome is subject to the kingdom of God.

Paul, awaiting his trial before Caesar, is under house arrest. Even though he is confined, Paul is still able to receive visitors and preach the Gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance." Paul notes in 2 Timothy 2:9 that though he suffers imprisonment, "the word of God is not bound." He even sees that his imprisonment has actually "served to advance the gospel" because it's become known that he has been imprisoned "for Christ" and because others have risen to take his place (Philippians 1:12-14). They can imprison the messenger, but they can't imprison the message.

The Gospel triumphs in unexpected ways

Today, of course, no one calls Caesar Lord or submits to him. The contemporary parallel to Caesar isn't any earthly ruler. Do you know who it is? It's the individual. It's you. You are Lord. Or so we're told. Nevertheless, just as the Jewish king upstaged the Roman king in the

first century, he upstages all rulers in our day, including those who claim to rule their own lives. We are all are subject to the kingdom of God.

The biblical narrative features the victory of God, but it's a strange victory, isn't it? Jesus defeats evil by letting evil do its worst to him. We should therefore also expect the Gospel of God to triumph in unexpected ways and unexpected places. Those who should believe don't believe. Those who shouldn't believe do believe. The leading advocate of the Gospel is imprisoned, but the Gospel advances nonetheless.

And what did Paul do in prison, by the way? He wrote letters, including Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Have you, some two thousand years later, been encouraged by those letters? How about this?

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

When you think the Gospel is losing, it's winning, even if you can't see it.

How might the Gospel triumph around here, where the church doesn't enjoy the best reputation?

Get to know them

Let's circle back to Acts 28:17-22. Remember, the Jews who met with Paul said that they had heard negative reports about the "sect" of believers that Paul belonged to but also that they hadn't heard any negative reports about him personally.

Today, many people in our part of the world have heard negative reports about the church and therefore don't have a favorable impression of it. On the one hand, we, therefore, may tend to shy away from people and hide our faith, lest we are identified as "one of those." On the

other hand, while people tend to mistrust institutions, they're more open to individuals. Although they may have heard negative reports about the church, perhaps they haven't heard any negative reports about you.

Get to know people. Let them get to know you. You don't necessarily have to go searching for people to know; you probably already know enough people—in your workplace, in your school, in your neighborhood. Ask them about their lives. Tell them about your life.

Maybe they'll find out you don't bite. Maybe they'll even find out you're human. Maybe they'll find out that you aren't bringing charges against anyone, just as Paul wasn't bringing charges against anyone. Maybe they'll find out that you're for people, not against them, just as Paul was for people. Maybe they'll sense somehow that you, like Paul, have something that they don't have, something that they might even want. And what is that? It's hope. Stripped of the biblical narrative, they gaze out on a landscape that offers nothing that they could call hope. You know something that they may not know: no matter how bad things get, the story has a good ending and that, astoundingly, the bad things will be used to create the good ending.

Maybe, if you get to know them and they get to know you, they'll even say to you something like what the Jews said to Paul: "we desire to hear from you what your views are." You might even get to tell them the biblical narrative: the one about Jesus defeating evil with love. The Gospel might slice right through them like a two-edged sword. You might see the Gospel triumph in an unexpected way.

Maybe if you get to know people, they'll get to know Jesus.

Sheldon Vanauken in his book *A Severe Mercy*, tells the story of moving to Oxford, along with his wife, and getting to know five people who were followers of Jesus, "but we liked them so much we forgave them for it":

We began, hardly knowing we were doing it, to revise our opinions, not of Christianity but of Christians. Our fundamental assumption, which we had been pleased to regard as an intelligent insight, had been that all Christians were necessarily stuffy, hide-bound, or stupid—people to keep one's distance from. We had kept our distance so successfully, indeed, that we didn't know anything about Christians. Now that assumption soundlessly collapsed. The sheer quality of the Christians we met at Oxford shattered our stereotype, and thenceforward a reference in a book or conversation to

*someone's being a Christian called up an entirely new image. Moreover, the astonishing fact sank home: our own contemporaries could be at once highly intelligent, civilized, witty, fun to be with—and Christian.*³

Followers of Jesus can be intelligent, civilized, witty, and fun to be with? Who knew?

One day, when I was working as a newspaper editor, a reporter approached me and said she'd like a word with me in private. What could this be about? I wondered. I walked outside with her, and we sat down on a curb. She told me that her life was falling apart. "I feel that you know what's important in life," she said. Wow! I told her about Jesus and how he had helped me, and when I did, and when I looked at her face, it looked as if something had sliced right through her like a two-edged sword. That day, she began moving toward Jesus.

Get to know people. Let them get to know you. Maybe they'll get to know Jesus.

The story continues

Thus the book of Acts comes to an end. Wait, what happened to Paul? For whatever reason, Luke doesn't say. But consider this:

At the beginning of his narrative, Luke told Theophilus, the recipient of Acts, that he had already conveyed to him, in what we know as the Gospel of Luke, "all that Jesus began to do and teach." In Acts, Luke conveys all that Jesus continued to do and teach through his first followers after the coming of the Holy Spirit. The story of Acts isn't finished yet. Jesus isn't through yet. As Paul says, "this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles": it's been sent to the whole world. It's been sent to the end of the earth. It's been sent to us.

Now Jesus sends us into the world, not least to get to know people and to let them get to know us. The Spirit is with us. The story continues.

So, turn to Acts 29. There is no Acts 29 you say? Yes there is. You're living it.

Endnotes

¹ Kinnaman, David. *unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

² Garrison Keillor, "Dying of Light," *New York Times Sunday Book Review*. 3 Oct. 2016.

Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: HarperOne, 1977). 67-68.