

Scripture-centered Evangelism

Daniel 10:15–21, Acts 15:1–4

Paul and Silas, having been released from jail in Philippi, say goodbye to the saints there and go on their way. They leave behind a church plant that will flourish into a mature church with its own officers: overseers and deacons.¹ Paul will later write one of his letters to this very church. Biblical evangelism—the preaching of the evangel or gospel, the good news of Christ—has as its objective the establishment of *churches*. This is a topic that ought to be of the greatest importance to every Christian, for without the gospel, we are all lost and utterly without hope, bound for everlasting fire that will consume the enemies of God. But God cares for us and gave us his church to teach us the truth and nurture us as we live as strangers and pilgrims in this present world.

The title of the sermon this morning is “Scripture-centered Evangelism.” As we will see, the evangelism carried out by Paul’s missionary team is very much Scripture-centered. We will consider our topic under three heads: Paul’s *methodology*, Paul’s *message*, Paul’s *mentoring*—first,

1. Paul’s methodology

Our text this morning gives us great insight into the way the apostle Paul carried out the great task of evangelism. As Paul, Silas and Timothy traveled, we read that “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.” We are going to focus on three ideas that constitute Paul’s methodology: *reasoning*, *explaining* and *demonstrating*. But before we do that, notice that the missionary team sought out a synagogue of the Jews. This was Paul’s custom. Though the Jews had officially rejected God’s Messiah, there were individual Jews who by the grace of God might be receptive, and Paul wanted to reach out to them. There was no synagogue in Philippi, so in his preaching there he had to start from scratch, as it were. He couldn’t assume that his hearers had any acquaintance with the Old Testament Scriptures. They were thoroughly steeped in pagan ideas; all they knew was the pagan worldview. They are like a lot of people in our world today. They walk around in darkness, trying to make sense of things apart from the knowledge of God. They erroneously assume that this present life is all there is, that there is no God, that there is no absolute truth. They assume that as long as they make money, enjoy earthly pleasures and don’t hurt anybody, they’ll be OK when they die. What’s important to them is social media, Tik-Tok videos and having a good time. The idea of knowing and being in a right relationship with their Creator is utterly foreign to them; learning about it is for them a waste of

¹ Phil. 1:1

time. The Bible's warning that "there is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" doesn't merit their attention.

We can see this in the clash of cultures surrounding the issue of abortion. Two days ago the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, returning the issue of abortion to the states—to the people and their elected representatives. Yet the cultural left—Hollywood and the mainstream media—is livid. Yahoo News spun the story as "... a ruling that whisked away the constitutional right to abortion." That is a boldfaced lie, for there is no right to abortion in the US Constitution, and asserting it does not make it so. *Roe v. Wade* was an exercise in raw judicial power that had no basis in law. It was a power-grab by the judiciary, which under the Constitution has no—zero!—legislative authority. With the overturn of *Roe*, the matter of abortion is properly returned to the people and their elected representatives.

Clearly, children killed by abortion are human persons. They have distinct DNA from their mothers. They are our neighbors. The Bible teaches, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." That is in both testaments. It is wrong to kill an innocent neighbor. If we have a disagreement with a neighbor, the one thing that we should never do is initiate violence against him. As Christians, we are to live quiet and peaceable lives.

Our founding fathers understood that human rights are not bestowed by government but by the God in whose image we were created. As our Declaration of Independence asserts, governments are instituted to secure these rights. The first among them is the right to life.

Jesus declared, "Let the little children come unto me." Abortion is a direct violation of that principle; it snuffs out a human life and prevents a person from coming to Christ. Scripture declares that those who are in rebellion against God "love death" (Prov. 8:36). Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the *life*." Let us commit ourselves to pray the end of abortion in all fifty states. And let us as individuals and as a congregation reach out lovingly to women with unplanned pregnancies. Abortion is not the answer! May God give us wisdom to speak the gospel to people around us who know only the pagan worldview.

But as we look at Paul's methodology, let us focus on three ideas found in our text: *reasoning*, *explaining*, *demonstrating*. We read that for three Sabbaths Paul went into the synagogue and "reasoned from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating." The word for "reasoned" comes from the root that comes into our common language as *dialogued*. Now the gospel is very much a message—a message from the living God. Paul says elsewhere that it was "by revelation" that God made known to him the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:3–4). It wasn't something that Paul made up on his own. The gospel is a message from God. But it must be communicated sensitively, in a culturally-conscious manner, in a way that the

recipient can understand. This is evident from the variety of ways that the gospel is communicated by Christ and the apostles. The preacher must learn to read the body language and facial expressions of his hearers. Is he getting through? Are his hearers sitting on the edge of their seats with keen interest, or is he putting them to sleep? Paul “reasoned with his hearers from the Scriptures. He read their responses, whether verbal or non-verbal. His goal was not to make a certain number of presentations but to communicate with hearts. In the church clearly we are to speak with one another (Eph. 5:16), but this principle is not restricted to Christians only. As we interact with our unsaved neighbors we should learn to *dialogue* with them—to communicate truth about Christ in a culturally-conscious manner, speaking to their hearts. Our goal should be not just to complete a certain number of presentations, but to touch people’s hearts in life-changing ways. As you share the gospel, learn to read your neighbor!

So we read in our text that Paul *reasoned* from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *demonstrating*. The second word is “explaining.” The word comes from a root meaning *to open* (the KJV has “opening”). Paul opened up the Scriptures to his listeners. The church’s authority is the Holy Scriptures. The Christian message is true, not because the church asserts it, but because it is the true message of salvation taught in Holy Scripture. The Christian message is true, not because of the forcefulness of the speaker, but because it is the message of Scripture. The church has no independent teaching authority; all its authority is derived from Holy Scripture. One of our Bible study ladies testified that she attends a church where people are told what to believe and do without being shown that what they are being told to believe and do is the teaching of the Bible. She likes our women’s Bible study because the leaders make an effort to prove all their teachings from Scripture. The point of Christian teaching is to open up the Scriptures, showing what they mean and how we are to obey them. This is what Jesus did. After he rose from the dead, when he spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the men testified, “Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He *opened* the Scriptures to us?” In the original uses the very same word.²

The third word is “demonstrating.” The Greek word literally means *to set before*. It is used of setting out food by placing it on a table. It also can mean to *deposit*, to *entrust*, to *commit* to one’s charge. Restaurants focus on the *presentation*. Artfully presented food seems tastier. Steak served on a perfectly clean plate, hot to the touch, with a sprig of fresh parsley to the side, served by smiling, smartly-dressed waiters and waitresses, can be very appealing. The

² διανοιω (cf. Luke 24:32)

Christian communicator must present the gospel appealingly, while showing that it is indeed the teaching of Scripture.

So here was Paul's methodology: he adapted his message—not the content of the gospel, but his manner of presentation—to the needs and background of the hearer, whether Jew or Gentile. He entered into a dialogue, watching at every moment how his message was being received. He opened up the Scriptures and demonstrated that the gospel which he preached was in fact the teaching of Holy Scripture. May God grant us all the ability to use a biblical methodology as we witness for Christ. Secondly, consider

2. Paul's message

Our text records how Paul “reasoned . . . from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating.” What did he demonstrate? “That the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead” and that “this Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.”

Clearly, Paul's message was *Christ*. This is a powerful message that is plainly taught throughout the book of Acts. Peter's message was Christ, the Jerusalem Council's message was Christ, and Paul's message was Christ. Indeed, Christ himself assured us that the message of the whole Bible is Christ. In Luke 24 he declared that “all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” The Law, the Prophets and the Psalms are the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible. What Jesus essentially was saying was that “The whole Bible speaks of me!” Anybody else saying that would be a liar and a megalomaniac. But when Christ said that, he was speaking the truth. A Bible without Christ would have no power to save. The only way for any person to be saved is through Christ. Apart from him we are lost and on our way to eternal punishment. *Christ* is the message of the Scriptures.

We have a neighbor who is very involved in the Charismatic movement. Every time we see him he brings up “the Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit.” Now the Holy Spirit is real. His work is essential. Without him, no spiritually dead sinner would ever come to Christ. But the Spirit's job is to testify concerning Christ (John 15:26). The message of the Scriptures is not the Spirit, but Christ. Why Christ? Our text explains: “Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead.” If Christ had not suffered, died and risen again, we would have no gospel. There would be no good news. We would all remain lost and dead in our sins. The only way that a dirty rotten sinner can be reconciled to a holy God is through Christ. God is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and evil cannot dwell with him. The only way that a sinner can stand in the presence of a holy God is to be washed in Christ's blood. This is why Paul labored to make Christ known. He didn't go to Thessalonica to argue about politics, or whether Caesar was a good man, or how the Greeks could throw off Roman oppression. The need of the hour—the need of *every* hour—is for guilty sinners to come to God through Christ. People can disagree about politics

and still get to heaven, but people cannot disagree about Christ. He is the only way of salvation. “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” Amen!

Christ is the message of the Scriptures. Our Old Testament reading this morning was Daniel 10. At the beginning of that chapter the prophet Daniel receives a message from God. This message, which is specifically said to be “true” (v. 1), concerned events in the Gentile world that would take place over the course of the next three hundred years and that would impact the covenant people, then in exile. When Daniel received this message, he was greatly disturbed. He fasted and prayed for three whole weeks. Later, as he stood by the side of the great river Tigris, an angelic being appeared to him and spoke to him audibly. Daniel was utterly overwhelmed by his message. The angel related that he had been sent to him some three weeks before, but “the prince of the kingdom of Persia”—apparently an evil angel—had blocked his way. Now, he had come to give Daniel understanding of the message that had been revealed to him three weeks earlier. That message, verse 21 tells us, had been “noted in the *Scripture* of Truth”—not the Holy Scriptures, but the eternal counsel of God. Man, of course, is finite, and cannot know the future; but God is infinite and knows the future. As we’ve already seen in the book of Acts, “known to God from eternity are all His works” (Acts 15:18). God knows the future and has revealed his basic plan to his covenant people in his word.

The reason we read the Daniel text this morning is because of its reference to “the Scripture of Truth.”³ Paul will later characterize the Bible as the “Holy Scriptures.” He will write in Romans 1 about that “which He promised before through His prophets in the *Holy Scriptures*.” Years later he will write to his disciple Timothy, now accompanying him on this missionary journey, that “from childhood you have known the *Holy Scriptures*” (2 Tim. 3:15).⁴ As Paul practiced Scripture-centered evangelism he reasoned with people from the Scriptures. This is largely a New Testament term, but here it is as well, in our Old Testament text. Thirdly, consider

³ Translated variously as “the scripture of truth” (KJV), “book of truth” (ESV), “Book of Truth” (NIV), “writing of truth” (NASB), “a dependable book” (NET), “the true writings” (GOD’S WORD Translation). The original refers to writing, not a book, *per se*. *Writing* and *Scripture* are synonyms; *writing* comes from Old English, *scripture* from Latin. The KJV and NKJV generally translate the Hebrew word כְּתוּבָה as *writing* when it refers to the writings of men, but in this case, where it clearly refers to the word of *God* (not the written word, but the eternal mind of God) they correctly translate it as “scripture” (or “Scripture”), nicely tying it in with the New Testament teaching (Rom. 1:2, 2 Tim. 3:15).

⁴ Rom. 1:2 has “which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures” [ἐν γραφαῖς ἁγίαις]; 2 Tim. 3:15 has “from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures” [τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα]. The LXX of Dan. 12:21 is similar: ἀπογραφὴ ἀλήθεια, calling to mind John 17:17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth [ἀλήθεια].”

3. Paul's mentoring

As Paul spoke of Christ, some believed. We read that “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.”

What an evangelist wants you to do is to believe the gospel. The gospel is persuasive. There is sufficient evidence for it. God has revealed his glory in creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” Whether we reflect on the orderliness of the planetary movements, the sun being the perfect distance to earth—not too close, not too far away—the design of the human body, the intricacies of a baby’s finger, or how an infant or toddler can learn his or her mother tongue (sometimes multiple tongues) without any formal instruction, but an older person struggles to learn a foreign language, no matter how hard he studies, we are brought face to face with the reality of God. Furthermore, he has given us the Holy Scriptures. They are immediately inspired by God. They are perfect in their vocabulary and composition. Members of this church profess that we “believe the Bible to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the true doctrine of salvation.” Why do we do this? The Westminster Confession of Faith answers: “the heavenliness of the [subject] matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full [disclosure] it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.”⁵

The brilliant scholar Saul of Tarsus, who before his conversion was a notorious persecutor of Christians, became persuaded of the Christian faith and became its most able defender. The Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and said, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” Saul’s response was, “Who art thou, Lord?” The answer: “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest.” Saul—later known as Paul—became an eloquent preacher and evangelist because he was persuaded by the evidence. He would not recant, even in the face of extreme persecution and even martyrdom, because he was convinced of its truth. As he preached of Christ, we read that some of his hearers were persuaded. Paul himself was persuaded. He wrote that “For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am *persuaded* that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (2 Tim. 1:12).

If you are an honest inquirer, there is sufficient evidence to persuade you, too. The pastor or elders are always available to counsel you and pray with you. If you have doubts, you can pray, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

⁵ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01

In answer to the prayerful ministry of the word in Thessalonica, we read that “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.” These were the men and women whom Paul and his team mentored. Through the working of God’s Spirit these individuals, too, became part of another new church plant.

So here we have Scripture-centered evangelism. Paul’s methodology, message and mentoring can still be used today to build the church, to the glory of God our Savior, amen.