Text: Acts 17:1-9
Title: Applied Apologetics: Evangelizing Thessalonica
Truth: Paul supplies us a general method for evangelism to a Jewish audience.
Date/Location: Wed 9/18/2013 and Sun eve 9/22/2013; Wed 9/18/2024 at FBC; Wed 12/11/2024 DBTS Chapel

Introduction

We will read about some evangelism "how to" along with some good results and some bad results.

At the narrative level, this passage answers the question, **"What did Paul do after Philippi?"**

I think better than that is a question directed at more general application: **"How does a missionary go about his work, particularly among a Jewish audience?"**

To phrase it in another way that is even more broad, not limited to missionary work, **"What truths or methods can I draw from the apostolic example of Paul in his ministry in Thessalonica?"**

I. Ministry at Thessalonica, v. 1-2

A. After suffering quite severe persecution in the city of Philippi, Paul moved southwest to another city of Macedonia. There, he was allowed to speak in the synagogue for three Saturdays (Sabbaths). He likely stayed longer in the community, but it appears that the synagogue was closed to him after the initial three week period because the Jews did not want him to teach any more.

B. Synagogues were commonplace in Israel during the first century and in major cities throughout the Roman empire. In Rome itself there may have been a dozen synagogues. They were places of assembly for Jews for prayer and reading of the Hebrew Bible and other rituals. They continue those purposes today and often serve as Jewish community centers. They originated in the time of the Babylonian captivity when worship or prayer at the temple was impossible.

II. How Did Paul Carry out His Ministry?, v. 2-3

A. The **Basis** of His Ministry: The Scriptures.

Notice that Paul's reasoning was "from the Scriptures." The holy writings are the foundation of his reasoning. Any kind of sermon or message not

controlled and informed by Scripture is not fit for the pulpit in the gathered worship of the church, nor for the evangelism of the lost.

Some people do not like to "appeal to authority." Instead they want to use facts, reason, logic or philosophy to gain the hearing and persuasion of lost people.

Two problems with this approach: First, as to the content of this reasoning, we are convinced that there is no reason, no logic, no philosophy, apart from God. There are no self-existent truths other than God Himself. There is no independent truth that will lead a person to true morality or God.

Second problem: We are also wise to the notion that depravity prevents the "logic" method from working on the hearer's side. Still, we do not throw out the need to use our heads, so to speak. It is just that we need divine illumination to be able to use our reason rightly.

There is no higher authority to which we could resort than the Scriptures. Sometimes, a direct appeal to authority is necessary to awake people to the reality that God is God, and we are not, and that God has commanded us to repent. This direct confrontation with the rebellious nature of man's heart is sometimes necessary to undermine their self autonomy. If God is at work, the person's conscience will respond.

Without the authority of Scripture, it is basically my word against the other person's word, and that stalemate will not likely be resolved.

B. The **Method** of Paul's Ministry: Reasoning by Explaining and Demonstrating

1. He **reasoned** – this means to engage in speech interchange, converse, discuss, even to argue (BDAG), often in the context of instructional discourse. It is speaking in a somewhat formal setting with a back-and-forth component. A classrooms setting is a good way to envision this; or a roundtable where there is a leader in the discussion.

   Unfortunately today this has become relatively more difficult than in the recent past. I never thought I would say this, but I kind of liked the good-old days of true "liberalism" where ideas could be exchanged, debated, speech was more free, etc. Today, much of liberalism has turned into leftist-progressivism, which does not maintain the value of free thinking and would rather shut down opposing viewpoints. This leaves a lot less room for discourse and conversation. And that at a time when we might live in the most educated city in America but Biblical literacy is almost non-existent.

The next two words express how Paul carried out his side of the conversation. He reasoned by *explaining* and *demonstrating*.

2. **Explaining**. This means "opening" up the meaning of something, in this case, interpreting the Bible. This is like what we discussed at 16:32 where Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to the jailer, not just leaving it at "believe on the Lord Jesus." This is an interesting word, used for the opening of the womb (Luke 2:23), opening of the ears (Mark 7:34), opening of the eyes (Luke 24:31), and the opening of the Scriptures (Luke 24:32 where Jesus "opened" the Scriptures to the disciples).

   The need for explanation is why a pastor is required to be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2).

   Expositional preaching is taking a passage of Scripture, usually a short section but it can also be a verse or a longer section, **explaining** it, and **applying** it, using illustrations and argumentation as well as plain old teaching. An expositional message is the explanation and application of a Biblical text controlled by that text. The aim of such a message is to help people understand the meaning of what God has said, and obey it in terms of applying it to themselves in their lives—whether individually, family, community, or in the church. An expositional message does not use the text as a launching pad for a relatively disconnected topical sermon.

   Another kind of message is a topical message, still controlled by Scripture. It treats a certain topic or subject by addressing several texts in the Bible about that topic. It should explore the meaning of those texts relative to the topic and their relevance to the audience.

   I imagine that, like in the book of Hebrews, Paul here did not give a lengthy homily on a single text of Scripture. Inistead, he used *various* texts, speaking about the topics that we will examine further below. He was also using recent history, which was not yet written down in the gospels or epistles because those did not yet exist. So he did not have a textual witness to the events. He had eyewitnesses, and he himself was an eyewitness. He took truth from the Old Testament and connect it with truth from recent events.

   Our method is necessarily different today because we do not know eyewitnesses nor are we ourselves eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. We have textual witness of both Old and New Testaments as

to the acts and doctrine of God, as well as the testimony of what God has done in our lives and the lives of others.

3. **Demonstrating**. This word means to point out or set forth, as in showing the truth of something from the Scriptures. Have you ever been "proved" wrong in something you were thinking, or something you did not understand was shown to you clearly? This is the feeling that the word "demonstrate" brings. It is when someone "points out" a truth and creates the "aha" moment where you connect the dots and realize something that you did not realize before.

C. The **Content** of Paul's Ministry: Next we consider three specific truths which Paul explained and demonstrated. There are three of them:

1. **Christ had to suffer**. It was necessary for him to die, to suffer His "passion" (from the verb "πάσχω" to suffer). Pursuant to the will of God, there was no other option if anyone were to be saved and if the world were to be restored to (greater than) its former glory. Without His suffering, there would be no atonement for mankind, no restoration of all things. He "had to." There was no other way.

   You might argue with this in your mind. "What do you mean, Christ *had* to suffer? Could not God have arranged some other way? It seems unfair to put someone through such suffering for another person. Does this indicate that God is not good?"

   We might think we can explore that hypothetical question, but Christians believe that God, as all-wise and holy, has put in place the best possible plan given God's complete character, *all* circumstances, *all* facts, *all* moral considerations, *all* sin, all of the highest purposes, and *all* of everything else that we could think of or not think of. Our knowledge and moral capacity is so humble compared to the greatness of God that we cannot question His ways.

2. **Christ had to rise again from the dead**. In the same way as the suffering was necessary, Christ's resurrection from the dead was also necessary. In the first case, He died for our offenses, to take them on our behalf. In the second case, He arose from the dead to show among other things that our justification is complete (Romans 4:25). Not only could death not keep him (Acts 2:24), but it was needful for him to rise for our salvation to be complete. For everyone else, it is necessary that they stay dead until the end time; for Christ it was necessary that He rise again first!

Paul pointed back to the Old Testament Scriptures to show that the Messiah in those texts is predicted to die and rise again from the dead. He *has* to do both of these things for another reason then—not just because of the theological necessity of the atonement in soteriology, but also and simply because God *predicted* it.

This is a stretch for a Jewish audience member because he must connect some dots that he is not accustomed to connecting. If he or she were accustomed to thinking of a triumphant Messiah, death and resurrection seems impossible. Or if they were thinking there are two Messiahs (one suffering, one in glory), this would be hard to swallow. Or if they thought the nation of Israel itself is the anointed servant of God, these dots would take some refactoring in their brain.

3. **This Jesus is the Messiah** (Christ). Paul's ministry was devoted to convincing his audience that Jesus is the Messiah of God. He dedicated himself to preaching Christ (1 Cor. 2:2, 2 Cor. 4:5).

   It is "THIS" Christ that Paul is proclaiming. Paul would teach that it is no coincidence that Jesus did all these things that the OT Messiah was prophesied to do—because Jesus *is* the Messiah! He is talking about the Biblical Christ, the Son of God, not a "historical Jesus" or a "Jesus Seminar" Jesus.

   Over the years I have become somewhat better prepared and practiced on the passages that can be used to demonstrate to people Christ's Messiah-ship. It seems to me that many of us could be prepared to evangelize this way, using the Old Testament to show what the Messiah was predicted to be, and then showing that Jesus checks all the boxes. The identity being established, we then call our Jewish friends to believe in Him.

Application: We should be able to take our Old Testament and show someone the Messianic prophecies and analogies and connect the dots to Jesus of Nazareth. A great example of this is Philip speaking of Christ to the Ethiopian official in Acts 8 from Isaiah 53.

More or less direct prophecies: Gen. 3:15, Daniel 7:13-14, 9:25-26, Psalm 110, Isaiah 7:14, 9:1-2, Isaiah 53:8-10 (death for sinners), 61:1, Micah 5:2, Zech. 9:9, Deut. 18:15, Acts 2:25-30 (resurrection, from Psalm 16:8-11).

Implications: Isaiah 53:12 (implies resurrection). God's promises to the Messiah imply as well that He will be raised (Psalm 2:7, 110, Isaiah 55:3).

Analogies: Passover Lamb, scapegoat, likeness to the nation of Israel and her sojourn in Egypt and wilderness wandering, the elevated bronze serpent, and parallels with the righteous sufferer in Psalms.

I would guess that if I worked to fill out those lists, the analogies would be more in number than the direct prophecies. I think that the phenomenon of canonical linguistic priming plays a role here so that there are fewer direct prophecies than some interpreters think. Regardless, there is a lot of material for us to work with.

Obviously, this method does not land as well for Gentiles who have little or no care about a Messiah. But later in Acts 17 we read about how Paul addressed a more Gentile audience—by reaching farther back into Biblical history to find a point of commonality.

III. Reception and Rejection at Thessalonica, v . 4-9

A. Some listening were persuaded and many joined Paul and Silas. It is not certain if all these truly became believers, or if some were just interested parties. Those who were truly persuaded by Paul's explaining and demonstrating about Christ Jesus became baby Christians and a new local church was born.

B. Unbelieving Jews began to break the tenth commandment about coveting. They were envious of Paul and Silas and their success at gaining a hearing among a large crowd of people. Some other places where envy came into the picture are found in Acts 7:9 and 13:45. The definition of this word is interesting: "to have intense negative feelings over another's achievements or success, be filled with jealousy, envy toward someone."

They implemented their envy by getting or hiring some evil men to start a riot and attack the house of a man named Jason. They were actually trying to find Paul and Silas to bring them out to the mob and probably kill them.

C. Every place Paul goes there seems to be trouble! This time Jason and some other new believers are dragged out of their homes and brought before the magistrates/rulers of the city. Apparently, Paul was out for a walk or something and they didn't find him! He may have been in hiding. Verse 10 records how they had to leave Thessalonica under the cover of darkness at night to get away without causing a stir.

D. Accusations made against Jason and friends were really directed at Paul and Silas, but anyone associated positively with them would be in the line of fire as well. (I just watched a video of a LGBTQ person who

attended a Charlie Kirk and Turning Point USA event. That person was "un-friended" by a number of her contacts *while she was at the event* because they found out that she was simply there—there to "hear the other side." This is how petty unbelieving people can be. In this case, they were not true friends to this young woman.)

Here are the accusations against Jason, Paul, and Silas:

1. True: turned the world upside down and come here, although probably way overstated because it wasn't like millions of people were getting saved and the Roman empire was immediately becoming the Holy Roman Empire (which was neither holy nor Roman).

2. False: The charge against Jason was that he had offered hospitality to the missionaries. One man's hospitality to a good person is another's harboring of a criminal, so they made it sound that Jason was doing bad.

3. False: acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar. Jesus taught and the apostles practice that what belonged to Caesar was Caesar's, and what belonged to God was God's (Matthew 22:21).

4. True: There is another King, and that king is Jesus. If this comes into conflict with demanded exclusive worship of the emperor, then so be it. But it does not, because Jesus said Himself that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

E. It is easy to make a situation sound far worse than it really is. You can also make it sound far better than it really is too. Transparent honesty is hard to come by among humans.

F. The fact is that these people had no good reason to be stirring up trouble and they should have been out working and making themselves productive, minding their own business.

G. In the end, the rulers took a bond from Jason and the other Christians and let them go. The rulers basically stole the believers' personal property. **Notice Hebrews 10:34 and a good attitude that we should have if such should occur to us.** Frankly, that would be tough to experience. We have learned that many of our Puritan brothers suffered the confiscation of their ministries, their farmland, and their homes, all for preaching Christ. We have not yet experienced that.

H. It was obviously too heated in the city for Paul and Silas to stay, so they departed (verse 10). The persecution was God's way of showing them that their particular work was done and it was time to move on.

Conclusion

Another application I drew from this text has to do with the compressed timeline in Thessalonica. We should recognize that God wants us to work and get ministry done without dawdling. The door of opportunity may close at any time. The benefit of having pressure like Paul and Silas is that you will get the essential job done efficiently, before you are forced to move on. There is a sense of urgency to it.

I was thinking of this in a different context that is absent persecution: for each person that we have in the church ministry, we have limited time with them. We do not know if we will be able to minister to them for one week, one month, one year, or 25 years. They could die at any time, retire and move, or leave in a huff over some unknown-to-us reason. We must use the little time that we have to its maximal effect.

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