

Acts 17:1-15, No. 35
“Another Thing Christians Do”
June 12, 2016
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Paul and Silas are making their way through what is now Greece on what is typically referred to as Paul’s second missionary journey.

Text Comment

- v.1 It was a hundred mile walk down the great Roman road, the Via Egnatia, from Philippi to Thessalonica, the capital of the province of Macedonia. Paul had a plan, obviously – that plan featured the larger, more significant cities rather than the towns – which is why they did not stop in some of the towns they passed on the way.
- v.3 Paul’s preaching, especially his evangelistic preaching, and the preaching of all the apostles it seems, was, in the terms that were fashionable in homiletical circles a few years ago, *transactional* rather than *interpersonal*. That is, it focused primarily on the Bible’s central themes of God’s law, human sin, Christ’s atonement, and the eschatological realities of judgment and eternal life (with a concentration on Christ’s two advents or comings). In 1 Thess. 1:9-10 we are given a summary of Paul’s preaching to the Thessalonians: “you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

According to Paul, the great reference points in any Christian life should be Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, and the Second Coming.

- v.5 Often in the Gospels and Acts the Jewish opposition to the gospel is said to have been motivated by jealousy. They resented the losses they suffered to the new faith, the excitement the gospel generated among its Jewish converts, and the influence it was having in drawing Jew and Gentile together. The animosity between Jews and Gentiles was a significant feature of Jewish religious culture in the 1st century. Very human and very likely!

This kind of observation, however, increasingly offends people today. But, of course the question is not whether Paul was anti-Semitic for criticizing the Jews in this way, but whether what he said was true? It is always difficult for us to balance a godly tolerance and charitable spirit with loyalty to the truth, but Paul did just that, remember. This is the man – this same man who pointed out the jealousy of his fellow Jews – who said he would be willing to be cursed for the sake of his brother Jews. He wore his love and his hopes for the Jews on his sleeve! He is our example in this: to express with as much conviction the love that believes all things, hopes all things, and keeps no record of wrongs even as you speak the truth, hard as the truth may sometimes be for others to hear.

- v.6 Obviously the reputation of Christian missionaries for changing the social landscape in various towns and cities had preceded them. The implication is that this was a dangerous revolutionary movement. The accusation was, in effect, that they were guilty of treason against the Roman state.
- v.9 We learn from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians that he must have stayed there for several months and that most of his converts were Gentiles. Luke has concentrated on his initial ministry to the Jews.
- v.10 Again there was no deliberately provocative behavior on Paul's part. Told to leave, he left. Berea was some 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica.
- v.14 Anticipating more trouble, they did not wait for the uproar to develop but hurried Paul on his way. But they must have thought that Paul's assistants would not provoke the same outrage Paul himself would, the famous Jewish rabbi turned Christian missionary, so Silas and Timothy were left behind to consolidate the work.

I have said a number of times already that Luke is not only narrating a slice of the early history of the Christian movement, but is doing so in a way that focuses our attention on representative facts about the Christian faith, the Christian life, Christian worship, and the Christian church. Along the way, for example, in the sermons we have had occasion to consider the place of prayer in the life of the Christian church, her charity toward the poor, her witness to the unbelieving world, her organization for ministry, and so on – all matters that Luke obviously considers to be of permanent importance to readers of his history. This is the way the church is going to be for the ages to come until Christ returns.

We have not yet focused our attention on a feature of this history that has been from the beginning a principal feature of Luke's story, namely the place of preaching in the advance of the gospel, preaching to make Christians of unbelievers and preaching to confirm and educate Christians in their faith. This morning you will receive a sermon about sermons. It certainly is as much as any other a subject emphasized in the text we have read. Paul began in Thessalonica by giving a sermon in the synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath, "reasoning with them from the Scriptures," as good a definition of preaching as you are likely to find. Even more emphasis falls on Paul as a preacher in the next paragraph, describing his ministry in Berea. There too Paul gave them the Word of God, explaining how it was fulfilled in Jesus, and these people are then commended, paid a terrific compliment, because they listened with such interest to what Paul was saying and then carefully checked his message against the Scripture itself. What we have read is all about preaching: its power and effect, its nature as an exposition and application of the Bible, and how it is to be listened to. To be sure, we are more than half-way through Acts now, and this is hardly the first time we have encountered preaching.

The whole story of gospel expansion in Acts began with a sermon, Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Subsequently the apostles preaching in Jerusalem was a, if not the principal instrument of the gospel's advance among the population of the capital. And so it continued: in Samaria, in Antioch, in Galatia, and now in Macedonia. Christianity has been, from the beginning a *preached faith*. It has a message to proclaim and that message is proclaimed by

preachers. And once people have been called to faith in Jesus Christ, there is much to learn about what it means to follow Jesus and much of that learning has always come from hearing sermons, from listening to preaching.

As John Donne the 16th century English poet and preacher explained:

“It is not God’s ordinary way to be whispering of secrets. For publication of which he hath constituted a church. And in this church his ordinance is ordinance indeed, his ordinance of preaching batters the soule, and by that breach the Spirit enters; his ministers are an earthquake, and shake the earthly soule; they are the sonnes of thunder and scatter a cloudy conscience.” [Cited in J.S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 211]

Have you sometimes wondered why you listen to so many sermons? It is, after all, almost always the largest part of a Christian Sunday service, at least in evangelical Protestant churches, those churches most directly shaped by the teaching of the Bible. It may not be the largest part of a Roman Catholic service, in fact, in those services it may be a minor part, a matter of a few minutes only, but, then, we regard that as a problem, a defect precisely because it betrays the pattern of both Holy Scripture and church history. Those of you who have been Christians for some time have listened to hundreds if not thousands of sermons over the course of your Christian life. Have you thought about this? Your fellow Americans, most of them, hardly ever hear a preacher preach a sermon, and you’re hearing sermons all the time. And you will listen to many more before you are done!

Why? Well, here is the reason, or, better, the reasons. 1) Preaching *has always been* one of the principal instruments of evangelism and the chief engine of Christian discipleship. Think of the priests and Levites of the OT, preachers all, or the prophets of the Old Testament, first and foremost preachers of the Word of God, whose books are summaries or precis of their sermons, or of the apostles of the New, or of the long line of gospel preachers whose personal history has proved to be, to a significant degree, the history of the church. The history of the church, one historian observed, is the history of her great men, and most of those men were preachers! Augustine was first a preacher; so were the Reformers, Luther and Calvin – they preached literally thousands of times –; so were Wesley, Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards; so were Spurgeon, Alexander Whyte, and Martyn Lloyd Jones. 2) The Christian faith rests on a message, the history of God’s work in the world and the authoritative history of that interpretation provided in the Bible. That message must be proclaimed, explained, and applied to life and God’s appointed way of doing that is through preaching. The Bible itself contains an immense amount of preaching – we have read a good deal of it already in the narrative of Acts – and we are told again and again in the Bible that its contents are *to be preached*. 3) First and foremost truth and life, as spiritual death in its own way, come through the ear. It was in *listening* to a lie that the human race fell into sin and under judgment, and it is in *listening* to the truth that it is restored to life.

Now, preaching is certainly not the only way the truth is conveyed to the soul in the life of men and women, boys and girls. The teaching children receive from their Christian parents has, no doubt, brought more Christians to living faith in Christ than sermons heard in church. Many others have become Christians and have been helped along in their Christian life by the witness

and encouragement of other Christians, laymen and laywomen, not preachers. Likewise many have been brought to faith in Christ reading a Christian book. There is, in other words, various kinds of informal preaching that all Christians may do and many Christians have done and will do. But here too it is the communication of the truth from mouth to ear, which, after all, is what preaching is.

The preaching of Christian ministers is, however, an essential enhancement of these more informal kinds of preaching and that is made clear in the Bible, not only in his historical narrative but in its specific instructions for churchmen. Paul famously told his younger assistant Timothy on one occasion, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, *to preaching*, and to teaching,” and on another, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, preach the Word...”

So it is that Calvin could say,

“The church is the pillar of the truth [– he’s quoting Paul there –] because by its ministry the truth is preserved and spread.” [*Com. on 1 Tim.*, 231-232]

So if you have wondered why preaching is so prominent in Christian public life and in their Lord’s Day worship, here is the answer. It is, in both Holy Scripture and church history, the divinely appointed instrument of spiritual formation, of conversion in the first place, and then of sanctification and discipleship. Christians grow today, as they have always grown, by hearing the Word of God read, explained, and applied to their lives, that is, by preaching.

But, obviously, like everything else in the Christian life there are depths and mysteries here. Paul, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, recollects that in his preaching there the gospel came to them not only in word, *but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*. [1:5] People who had never heard of Jesus of Nazareth, devoted their lives to him, in some cases no doubt, at their first hearing of Paul’s preaching. In Berea it was the same.

But, of course, it is not always so. Not only were there plenty of people in Thessalonica and Berea who found Paul’s preaching unconvincing, even offensive, there were other places where virtually no one responded in faith. And so, of course, preaching has continued to produce mixed results. Sometimes it is powerful to change minds and inspire hearts and sometimes it is not. The Holy Spirit must use the preaching for it to be truly effective and he does not always do so, or, at least, to the same degree.

But then we all know that there is a human element to this as well. Preachers are not the same. Some have great gifts of mind and oratory and are riveting speakers. Others are – how to put this? – not so riveting. Believe me, I’ve heard all the jokes. How a sermon is like the truth of God, it endureth forever; or how it is like the peace of God, it passeth all understanding. Or the one about the preacher who motioned to an elder to wake up a parishioner sleeping through the sermon only for the elder to reply, “You put him to sleep; you wake him up.” But we’ve all had *that* experience, haven’t we? We know what it’s like to listen to a sermon it’s a struggle to pay attention to.

Paul says, in a memorable statement to these same Thessalonians,

“...we...thank God continually because, when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.” [2:13]

This statement is perhaps as important to the Christian understanding of the nature and role of preaching as any other in the Bible. It leads to two immensely important conclusions. *First*, the minister himself is, as Calvin put it, simply a *nuda persona*, a bare person. Or as others have put it, the preacher is only *vox*, a voice. What matters is the Word itself, the truth. In other words it is the substance of the sermon, and the fact that the truth comes from God himself, that makes preaching as important as it is. *Second*, in the hearing of the sermon – assuming, of course, that the preacher is faithful to the Word of God – we are listening not to a man but to God himself. The *Second Helvetic Confession* of 1566, one of the most important of the creeds of the Reformation era, puts this quite boldly:

“The preaching of the divine word *is* the word of God.”

Do you understand what that means? This is how Martin Luther explained it.

“Yes I hear the sermon; but who is speaking? The minister? No, indeed! You do not hear the minister. True the voice is his, but my God is speaking the Word that he preaches or speaks.”

And that was Calvin’s doctrine of preaching as well. He said that preaching *was* the very Word of God for three reasons: 1) because it was an application of the Word of God; 2) because the preacher has been sent and commissioned by God as his ambassador with authority to speak on God’s behalf, and 3) because in that preaching God himself speaks, the Holy Spirit using the human words to communicate *his* voice to the soul.

This point is made in a striking way twice in the New Testament. In Romans 10:14 (and similarly in Ephesians 4:21) Paul writes, according to the English translations, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to preach?” Paul obviously thought preaching would continue to be crucial to the gospel’s advance in the world. As Jesus himself said, “This gospel must be *preached* in all the world; only then can the end come.” But Paul did not actually write, “...how are they to believe in him *of whom* they have never heard?” What he wrote was literally, “how are they to believe in him *whom they have never heard?*” Paul seems to think that it is Christ own voice that the world hears when the gospel is preached. The preacher disappears and the speaking and listening occur between Christ and the people who hear the sermon. Christ himself preaches the sermon! That is the point.

Again, as in so much else in the Christian life, there are mysteries here. How can God be speaking, we ask, when preachers don’t even agree what the text means or how it ought to be applied? How can God be speaking if the minister, faithful man though he may be, doing his best but poorly educated in the Word of God, gets the Bible wrong from time to time. After all,

we have had here a great interest in seeing ministers in the two-thirds world, so many of them without so much as a high school education much less a seminary education, get better theological training than they have so far received, training they want very much but often cannot find or cannot afford. Think of the men Jeff David is working with in Cuba, or Khen Tombing in Manipur, or Dan Steere and Jay Stoms in Africa. How can a poorly trained preacher be the very voice of God when he often makes mistakes in explaining what the Bible actually says? Like so much else in the Christian life, this too requires faith.

But then, how many people have come to the true knowledge of Christ and how many lives have been transformed by the grace of God hearing mediocre sermons delivered by those very same ill-educated pastors? Charles Spurgeon, you remember – certainly one of the great preachers of Christian history, one of the most influential preachers of Christian history – was converted by the very simple preaching of a layman who stood up to preach in the small Methodist chapel, into which a young Spurgeon had wandered that Sunday morning, when the minister failed to arrive because of a snowstorm. Perhaps the minister wouldn't have been as effective as the uneducated layman who simply kept repeating his text from Isaiah, "Look unto me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other." "Look," he told the few souls gathered on that snowy Sunday morning, including sixteen year old Charles Spurgeon. "Anyone can look." And Spurgeon heard the voice of God and looked!

I don't know how all of this works, no minister does. How does God use his Word to form Christ in us? How does one sermon or twenty change our hearts and lives? Why does one sermon from the same minister have such an effect and another no noticeable effect on us? Jonathan Edwards preached *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* to his own congregation in Northampton some weeks or months before he preached it in Ettrick in July of 1741. His own congregation was unmoved, but it stunned the people in Ettrick church, as Paul's sermons stunned many in Thessalonica and Berea.

Read George Whitefield's printed sermons or John Wesley's and I think you will struggle, as I did, to understand how such sermons moved mountains as they did. They strike us today as dry, dry, dry. Even Whitefield understood this. He said to someone who wished to print his sermons that he was welcome, but that he couldn't print the thunder and lightning as well. There is more in a Christian sermon than simply the words. Those sermons in fact fell upon great congregations in England as the voice of God himself and produced in thousands first tears, then rejoicing, and finally and dramatically changed lives. God can explain such things, we cannot.

The history of preaching is like the history of the church itself. It proceeds in fits and starts, it has its heroes and its villains, but a great many more simple men of ordinary attainments, long since forgotten. It has transformed the world – the great leaps forward taken by the kingdom of God have almost universally been accompanied by great preaching – and, at the same time, it has nourished a congregation Sunday by Sunday at a far more ordinary and pedestrian pace. But that faithful preaching is the very Word of God himself, is why careful listening and thoughtful examination of what is preached is commended so highly to us.

You see, because preaching *is* the Word of God there is something we are responsible to do when listening to sermons. Surely it is striking that Luke draws our attention to the way in which

the Bereans listened to Paul's sermons. He calls them "noble," more noble than others, for the eagerness with which they received the preached Word and for the care with which they compared what they heard to the Scriptures themselves. The Gentiles, who didn't know the Bible, couldn't do that of course. But these Berean Jews could and did and, without a doubt, they are being held up to us as an example to emulate. *The reason so many people became Christians in Berea is because they listened so carefully and thoughtfully to the sermons they heard.* When the Bible pays someone or someones a compliment, we are meant to sit up and take notice. I want to be noble. Don't you want to be noble? Well, here's the way, at least so far as God is concerned. You take care of how you listen to the preached word.

These Bereans were not like the congregations the great 17th century Anglican minister and poet, George Herbert, described: "The people that sit under the pulpit are usually as hard and dead as the seats they sit on, and need a mountain of fire to kindle them." [Cited in Scougal, *Life of God...Soul of Man*, xxv] I'm very happy to say of you that that is the very reverse of my experience here through many years. Your attentiveness and the eagerness with which you come back on the Sabbath evening for another sermon has always been a great encouragement to me, a source of pride, and something of which, I confess, I sometimes boast when I travel through the wider church.

But even you must confess, as I must, that our minds, as the Puritan Thomas Shepard said of his, are buckets without bottoms. [Whyte, *Thos. Shepard*, 195-198] You know immediately what he meant. We hear a sermon and it immediately runs out the bottom of our minds, leaving us unchanged, when, if only it were given the opportunity, every sermon we ever hear might change us dramatically for the better. If only we would listen to it as the very voice of God. Would that we heard every sermon as the Bereans heard Paul's sermons. There was no greater preacher ever than Jesus of Nazareth – God had one son and he made him a preacher! – but a great many of those who heard him had buckets without bottoms. So my friends, something we do so often – hear a sermon – is something we ought to think about carefully from time to time. There is a lesson we must learn about sermons and then learn again and again. John Keble was another Anglican, the 19th century priest, scholar, and hymn writer, author of *Son of My Soul My Savior Dear*:

“...when your son or daughter looks up to you and asks if that was a good sermon you just heard in church, say to him or to her, at least until they are old enough to judge for themselves, what John Keble's father told him when he was boy, 'My son, all sermons are good.'” [Whyte, *James Fraser*, 52-53]

And so it will prove to be if we listen for Christ's voice, if we seek for ourselves not a blessing but the truth, if we listen intending not only to hear but to believe and obey, if we take steps to remember what we have heard, and if, like the Bereans, we examine and reflect upon what we have heard with a Bible in our hands. They were more noble than most people, those Bereans.