

Spreading the Gospel Far and Wide

- My working title for this series on Acts is:
 - "Spreading the Gospel Far and Wide"
- Exploring a period of intense gospel proclamation, when the good news of Jesus was first heard by thousands of people
 - when new churches were planted, when the world was turned upside down!
 - worth asking the question, **were there characteristic things the Christians then did we can learn from?**
 - the passage we read tonight, and the two towns where the **action** takes place gives us some pointers!
 - and those pointers come in a society strikingly similar to ours in its **pluralism**, in its **immorality**, in its **cosmopolitan atmosphere**
- We'll spend time on two different aspects:
 - first looking at Paul, who was a **mind engaging communicator** of the gospel, and
 - second observing a group who showed a **mind engaging response** to the gospel

Mind Engaging Communication

- So, first, let's spend some time watching someone who was committed to **mind engaging communication**
 - Paul was called and equipped by God as one of the great evangelists and church planters of the early church
 - at the core of his approach, lying behind each element of his strategy for proclaiming Christ Jesus to the ends of the earth, was a desire to engage the minds of those to whom he went
 - look at verses 2-3 in Acts 17:
 - (2) *As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, (3) explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said.*
- He **reasoned**:
 - he discussed and preached, not simply imparting information, but seeking an engagement on the part of the hearer
 - the word **reasoned** is often used of discussions where argument and dissension was expected - Paul's reasoning with the Thessalonians sought to provoke in them a response, a response to the Lord he proclaimed
 - he wasn't just making a clear presentation; by his very approach he endeavoured to help those he came into contact with engage their minds, to understand and respond to the gospel.
- Neither was his approach merely looking for response
 - he was not manipulating his hearers, brow beating them with his intellectual prowess, or making a merely emotional appeal that Jesus would meet all their needs
 - his desire was that his audience would consider Christ's claims, consider His call on their lives, and being convinced and assured of the truth of the those claims would therefore decide to follow Him
- His method here was by **explaining** and **proving** from the **Scriptures**
 - the explaining and proving was by way of **opening up** the meaning of Scripture
 - he was unwrapping the gospel message, unwrapping the Biblical evidence, so that it was not hidden or obscured
 - he was rehearsing some of its the implications for them
- Paul wants his converts to (i) adequately respond to God's mercy and (ii) adequately worship God, **so** Paul seeks to engage the Thessalonians' minds right

from the outset!

- his desire **is** that they are able to adequately respond to God's mercy
- his desire **is** that they are able to adequately engage in the worship of God
- **so** he seeks to engage their minds, he seeks to have them think through the implications of Jesus being the Christ

- That's also why it was Paul's **custom** not only to go into the synagogue when he entered a new city, but more fundamentally to seek to reason with them from the Scriptures
 - in Corinth, in chapter 18 of Acts, Paul starts off in the synagogue, but is expelled
 - he then spends a year and a half teaching in the house of Titius Justus
 - **wherever he is, he seeks to engage the minds on those with whom he is sharing the good news of Jesus**
 - similarly in Athens in the latter half of Acts 17, as he debates in the Areopagus - more of that next week!
- In other words, its not just something he adopts in Thessalonica, nor even in those places where he is able to teach in the synagogue context
 - this reasoning, this engaging of the mind lies at the heart of Paul's communication of the gospel
- He was a **mind engaging communicator**.
 - if Paul our example, then we too should be mind engaging communicators, we too should be seeking to engage the minds of those with whom we share the gospel and its implications for our lives
 - hence value of "Start!" style, of discussion, not merely presentation

How do we engage the mind of a mindless society?

- But, how do we engage the mind of a mindless society? This is the stark question facing us. How **do** we engage the mind of a mindless society?
- At one level, I simply don't know! If I did, or if it was down to some simple method, then this and all the other churches would be a mite fuller!
- However, can I suggest that we will engage the mind of the our society by being different, by standing out as distinctively Christian. Jesus said to his first disciples: **"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"** (John 13:35). And that distinctively loving lifestyle will only come about as we engage our minds in response to the gospel. Now, we're about to move on to looking at the Bereans, who are our models for tonight of those who appropriately engaged their minds in response to the gospel. However, before we do so, let me issue this warning:

What happens if we do not engage the minds of our listeners?

- What happens if we do not engage the minds of our listeners?
- Jesus' parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23) makes this very clear - remember, seed sown on path, rocky place/shallow soil, amongst weeds, good soil. Stuff on path is picked away by birds, rocky place/shallow soil dies in the heat of the sun, weeds choke, good soil produces fruit. Path - those who do not understand the message about the kingdom. Rocky places - **quickly** receives, but no root, in other words hasn't thought through decision. Or again, weeds - "hears", but worries and **deceitfulness** of wealth choke life. A lack of basic theology, of mind engagement allows such a person to be deceived. Contrast this with good soil - **"man who hears the word and understands it."**
- In other words, if we fail to engage the minds of our listeners, then we fail to make fruitful disciples.
- Now, if we are concerned to make sure that those to whom we present the gospel are able to engage their minds... if we are concerned to ensure that our presentation helps people think properly about God, then we will also, inevitably be concerned about the way we ourselves respond to that same gospel. That's why I'd like us now to turn to our second set of role-models for this evening:

Mind Engaging Response

- Even though Paul was a **mind engaging communicator**, not everyone in Thessalonica was prepared to accept the message... and so Paul had to flee. About 45 miles up the road was Berea, and here Paul **again** seeks to communicate the gospel, **again** goes to the synagogue, and **again** seeks to engage the minds of his listeners. Only here we find a group of people who are commended for the way in which they responded to the gospel - they were of **"more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."** (GNB) If Paul was a communicator who sought to engage the minds of his hearers, here we have those who exhibited a **mind engaging response** to the gospel.
- Critically, they were concerned with the **truth** of what Paul was saying. They were not content to be convinced by his eloquence, nor were they happy to dismiss him out of hand as some kind of quack. They wanted to see whether what Paul said fitted into God's self-revelation. They clearly understood that they needed to engage their minds, they needed to decide whether this was true - for if it was, their lives would of necessity be changed for ever.
- We see in their response various elements:
 - first, they examined Scripture - it was an essentially **spiritual activity**, for they sought illumination and confirmation from **God's** word, not merely in Paul's eloquence. The words used also indicate that their attitude to Scripture was not superficial, it did not come down to mere proof-texting.
 - next, it was a **continual activity** - they did not merely hear Paul once, go away and check out his facts, and come back convinced - they grappled **daily** with Scripture.
 - and third, quite probably, it was a **communal activity**. The fact that "daily" is mentioned seems to be in contrast with the weekly Sabbath day meetings of the Thessalonians. The implication is that they met together. Remember Paul reasoned **with**, not **at** his hearers! Discussion. Hammering out the implications - as iron sharpens iron.

So what?

- Well, good for the Bereans! They engaged their minds. Does that make any difference for us? **"So what?"**, we might be tempted to say.
 - a good example is worth copying - the Bereans are explicitly of **"more noble character"** than the Thessalonians!
- There are many ways we can engage our minds in response to the gospel:
 - perhaps renewed commitment to daily BS, in whatever form - SU notes, etc
 - perhaps further BS in groups;
 - perhaps identify one issue or area of life, and follow it through (work, kids, etc.), using books, personal study of Scripture, asking people, discussion;
 - perhaps a commitment that in whatever area of Christian service we are currently most committed we will carve out some time to engage our minds and think through the way we approach it - maybe its on the Session, principles of leadership; maybe its BodyBuilders, what does Scripture say about training the young?; maybe its visiting an older person, friend or relative, what does the Scripture say about how or why we do that...
- Suggest take one area, one issue, one commitment - and follow through on it. **"I'm going to try and engage my mind in this area to start off with."** Not something so huge you'll never see progress! Maybe speak to others who may be in a similar situation - will they join you in focusing on that area?
 - value of reading group with other ministers for me
- **May we be found to be of that "noble character" that was found amongst the Bereans...**