

## **An Authoritative Word**

Acts 17:1-15

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, he wasn't trying to start a new church. He was trying to start a conversation. Luther was troubled by what he saw as abuses in the Roman Catholic system of relics and indulgences. People were being offered forgiveness of sins and freedom from Purgatory, without any real change of heart or behavior, but simply by going through a religious motion, or even worse, by giving money to the church. As one historian describes it, Luther "sought to defend the pope and indulgences from the bad name abuse would give them. In the ninety-five theses, Luther was being a good Catholic."<sup>1</sup>

But within four years, what began as a debate over the application of indulgences, became a battle over the very operating system of the church—one that would ultimately change the face of Christianity in the west. And the question underneath it all was this: Does the church have authority over the Bible, or does the Bible have authority over the church?

Luther's answer, and the answer that Protestants have maintained ever since, was that the Bible, as God's Word, has authority over the church. Whatever message the church preaches, it must come from the Bible. And if on any point a Christian or a church teaches something contrary to the Bible, the Bible gets the last say. It is our supreme authority because it is God's very Word.

The Catholic Church had long seen it differently: authority was something Jesus invested in his apostles, mainly Peter, and passed down through an unbroken chain of succession, centralized in the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. The Bible was God's Word, but so was the Church's Tradition. And when it came down to it, the Tradition could not only issue new doctrine or rituals that weren't in the Bible, it also told you how to interpret the Bible itself. And so functionally speaking, the Church had authority over the Bible.

This is obviously part of a much larger conversation that's been going on for centuries, and as a Protestant church, it's not hard to guess where we land. But what we'll see this morning in Acts 17, there is good reason to think that Luther really got it right on this one. The Bible, because it is God's very Word, has authority over God's people. It is the source and standard of all true knowledge of God. It's where we go to gain knowledge of God (it's the source), and it's what we measure all claims about God against (it's the standard). That means our doctrines and traditions must conform to Scripture; not the other way around. Scripture corrects us; we don't correct Scripture. It also means that to obey God is to obey Scripture, and to disobey Scripture is to disregard and disobey God. The Bible is an *authoritative* Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 43.

We see that in Acts 17 in both the pattern of Paul’s preaching and the nobility of some of his listeners. Go ahead and look with me there.

### **Apostle on the Move**

The book of Acts was written by Luke (volume 2 of Luke’s Gospel), and it tells the story of how the gospel of Jesus spread throughout the known world through Spirit-empowered witness of the church. A big part of that was the ministry of the apostle Paul. In ch. 17, we find Paul in the middle of his second missionary journey. His base of operations was the church in Antioch, who had commissioned him and Barnabas and sent them on their first journey back in Acts 13-14. In ch. 16, Paul set out again, this time with Silas. After visiting some of the churches he had planted in Galatia during his first trip, God calls him in a vision to go preach the gospel in Macedonia and Greece (16:6-10). They spend most of the rest of that chapter in Philippi, where they first did a little “beach ministry” on the shores of the river where they met Lydia (16:11-15), and then a little “prison ministry” after they got themselves arrested and led their jailor to faith (16:16-40).

By the time we get to ch. 17, they’ve been released from prison and have now made their way first to Thessalonica in vv. 1-9, and then to Berea, about 50 miles southwest, in vv. 10-15. And when we read these two stories side by side—Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica and Berea—we see several similarities, and one important contrast.

### **Paul’s Pattern: Preach the Scriptures**

In terms of similarities, the stories unfold in a parallel fashion: the both begin with Paul going to the local synagogue (vv. 1, 10) and preaching about Jesus from the Old Testament Scriptures (vv. 2-3, 10-11). Then we see two different responses—some believe his message and become followers of Christ (vv. 4, 12), while others get angry and jealous and make trouble for Paul (vv. 5-9, 13), with the result that Paul has to leave town pretty quickly (vv. 10, 14-15).

What’s notable among those similarities, as it relates to the broader question of the Bible’s authority, is what we learn about Paul’s pattern of ministry. Look again at vv. 2-3:

And Paul went in [to the synagogue], *as was his custom*, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”

Now it’s not particularly surprising that Paul was preaching about Jesus, specifically about who he is—the Christ or Messiah, and what he did—his death and resurrection. This is the heart of the Christian faith. That Jesus is Israel’s long awaited, messianic King—the Anointed One, Son of God and Son of Man—who gave his life on the cross for our sins, and rose from the dead on the third day, conquering death and offering new life to all who believe. We expect Paul to talk about that wherever he goes.

The part that we often don’t stop and think about here, was that Paul wasn’t just telling others who Jesus is and what he did, recounting the events recorded in the gospels, or his own experience encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus (cf. Acts 9); he was reasoning with them about Jesus *from the Scriptures* (in this case, the Old Testament). Think about that: for Paul, it wasn’t enough to

just tell the true story of Jesus, not unless he anchored it in the Old Testament Scriptures that are God's Word. Why would he feel the need to do that?

Some suggest it's because he was ministering to Jews in the synagogues, for whom the Bible had authority. Paul was simply contextualizing the gospel; trying to be relevant. And the theory goes, that were Paul ministering to Muslims (if they existed yet), he would have used the Koran; or if he's ministering millennials today, he would have used Instagram or Snapchat. So the Old Testament was incidental to his ministry; a mere strategy to connect with his audience.

There's no doubt that Paul was a master at connecting with his audience. Later in ch. 17, when he preaches to a bunch of pagan philosophers in Athens, he uses their own categories and even references their own poets to illustrate who Jesus is and what he did (17:16-34). But there's a huge difference between using the categories and literature of a culture in order to get a message across, and basing the *validity* of that message on those categories and writings. Paul's message in Athens was *thoroughly biblical*. Because the Old Testament new to the Greek philosophers he met, he didn't feel the need to cite chapter and verse in their first conversation, but everything he said could be backed up with chapter and verse, and in fact *must be*, because for Paul, the Bible has authority over all people (whether they recognize it or not).

Paul's pattern of preaching Jesus from the Old Testament was no mere communication strategy; *it was a fundamental commitment to the authority of Scripture*—not just for Jews, but for all people. Paul recognized that the only authority his message had was the extent to which it was faithful to the Scriptures. If you could show that what Paul said was out of line with the Old Testament, he would have corrected or rejected his views. The reason his gospel was true was because it was *in accordance with the Scriptures*.

And so Paul's pattern of preaching, wherever he goes, was not only to talk about Jesus, but to reason, explain, and prove *from the Scriptures* that this Jesus is the Christ.

We see this throughout the book of Acts. He testifies before King Agrippa in Acts 26: “. . . I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses [that's the Old Testament] said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23).

We see it in the letters Paul wrote to the various churches, including congregations made up primarily of non-Jews. Even for them the Old Testament was authoritative. In his letter to the Galatians, a predominately Greek church, he cites the Old Testament multiple times in declaring the gospel to them. You see a similar thing in Ephesians. And so it's not surprising that when he gives instructions to Timothy about how he should shepherd the churches he's serving, his central charge is this: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:2).

Paul recognized that the Bible is God's authoritative Word, and he submitted himself to that authority, even his message about Christ. The Bible has authority over us, because God has authority over us, and in the Bible God speaks.

## More Noble Jews

But Paul is not the only one in our passage who recognized the supreme authority of Scripture. And here is where we see the contrast between Paul's experience in Thessalonica and that in Berea.

In both cities some people were persuaded by Paul's message and put their trust in Jesus. But Luke draws a contrast between the general disposition of the Jews in each city. In Thessalonica, the Jews became jealous when they heard Paul's preaching. To the point that they actually hired out a bunch of scoundrels to go start a riot, and then blamed the riot on Paul's preaching, accusing him of treason against Caesar. And when they couldn't find Paul and Silas, they arrested the townspeople who hosted them, who had to be bailed out of prison. Notice that they didn't engage with Paul's message. Nor were they really concerned about the protection of Caesar's throne; most Jews in that day were longing for Rome to be beaten up and kicked out. They were *jealous*; they didn't want people to follow Paul or believe his message about Jesus; they wanted to be in charge. And so their goal was not to engage in thoughtful dialogue, but to silence the opposition and suppress any dissent, if necessary by force.

Contrast that to Paul's experience with the Jews living in Berea, in vv. 10-15. Paul does the same thing there—preaches in the synagogue, from the Old Testament, about Jesus. But v. 11 tells us this: “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

Luke describes these Jews as “more noble”—a phrase that usually refers to things like the nobility of one's birth or heritage. But here their nobility is shown not in their family line or social pedigree, but in their character and disposition toward God and his Word. They were humble enough to consider a new idea, secure enough to investigate it seriously, and committed to God enough to measure all ideas against the standard of his Word. They recognized that the Bible was authoritative. If they were going to believe a message about Israel's king, they had to see it for themselves in the Scriptures. They were willing to interact with Paul's teaching, but they didn't just take his message at face value; they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what he said was true. It was only after the Jews from Thessalonica showed up that things went south in Berea.

The point here is this—that even Paul, an apostle of Jesus, was not to be believed *unless his message was in line with God's authoritative Word*. The Bereans were commended for testing Paul's teaching, not chastised about it. The test of whether Paul's words were God's Word, was whether they aligned with the written Word of God. The Bible has authority over God's church; not the other way around.

## The Authority of Scripture in the Church

This has all sorts of implications for the life, doctrine, and mission of the church today, and in every age.

First, it means that *we must always submit our traditions and doctrines to the standard of Scripture, and always be willing to reform them if we are shown that the Bible in fact teaches something else*. Another way to put that: we have to make a distinction between revelation and theology. Revelation is what God says; theology is our best shot at understanding and applying what God says. Revelation is eternal, perfect, and unchanging; theology is always subject to revision according to God's eternal word.

This can get a little messy, and is a lot harder to control. But that's okay, because *God* is the one who controls his Word, not us. The Bible is God's Word, and he rules his church by his Word. This book has supreme authority over the life, doctrine, and mission of the church.

This is what the reformers called *sola scriptura*—scripture alone has supreme authority in the church. That doesn't mean that the Bible is our only authority (as some have mistakenly applied it). Every local church and every denomination or tradition has authority structures in place, statements of faith (whether written or unwritten), and there's nothing wrong with that—so long as we subject those statements and doctrines to the supremely authoritative Word of God. The Bible gets the last word in all matters of life, doctrine, and mission.

This was a major problem for the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. They confused their theology with revelation. They allowed their interpretations and applications of the Bible to become more authoritative than the Bible itself. For instance, in Matthew 15, the Pharisees chastise Jesus because his disciples broke the “tradition of the elders”—the Pharisee's “official” interpretation and application of God's Old Testament Law. Jesus' reply puts them in their place:

He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' <sup>5</sup> But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God,' <sup>6</sup> he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: <sup>8</sup> "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." (Matt. 15:3-9)

The Pharisees confused theology with revelation, their tradition with God's Word. And when we place our traditions and interpretations above God's word, according to Jesus we actually “make void” the Word of God—we empty it of its power, because what we're giving to others is no longer God's Word, but our word. And there's no power or authority in that unless it accords to God's Word. The Bible has authority over God's people; not the other way around.

A second implication of this is what we might call the *clarity of Scripture*. Think again about the fact that the Bereans were commended for going to the Scriptures themselves in order to verify what Paul taught about Jesus. Though there are no doubt parts of the Bible that are difficult to understand, the overall message is sufficiently clear to God's children, such that everyone is invited to read the Bible, and every Christian is in fact expected to examine the Scriptures daily to see if what their pastors or teachers are saying is true. The Bible is not just for the experts, scholars with years of training or clergy with a special office; it is for everyone. God is not hiding himself in his Word; he is *revealing* himself in his Word.

This was another significant departure between Rome and the Reformers during the Reformation. Prior to the reformation, the kinds of Bible studies that are now common today in churches like Westgate, and even some Catholic churches, were actually illegal. The first people tried to translate the Bible in the language of commoners (instead of Latin, which not even all the clergy understood), got themselves killed for their trouble. The idea that anybody could read this book was scandalous. What if people disagree on what it says? How do you decide who is right? How do you maintain control?

But that was part of the problem. The church forgot that *God was in control*. They rightly recognized that a central part of the pastor's job was to guard the flock against false teaching; but they wrongly forgot that to do that, they too need the flock to hold them accountable and correct them when they stray from God's Word.

This is one of the reasons, by the way, that I always ask you to open your Bibles during the sermon. And even though we put some of the verses on the screen behind me, it's still far better to open the Bible in your laps, so that you can see for yourself what I'm saying. You can see the context surrounding the passage. Don't just take my word for it; examine the Scriptures to see if what I'm saying is true. You need to hear a Word from God, not from me. And the only authority I have as a preacher of God's Word is to the extent that I am faithfully teaching God's Word.

So we must always submit our teaching to the authority of Scripture; the Scriptures are sufficiently clear so that all God's people should read them. One final implication: if this is an authoritative Word, that means reading and understanding the Bible is not enough. *We are called to obey*. To obey God is to obey Scripture; to disregard or disobey Scripture, is to disregard or disobey God.

And this, maybe, is the hardest part for some of us. Our problem is not with the Bible's authority, per se, but simply with the word "authority." Authority means that I don't call the shots. Authority means that someone other than me is in charge. There is no more offensive idea today. We might not have a problem recognizing that the Bible is inspired (as we talked about two weeks ago), or that it is reliable (as we looked at last week), but that it's authoritative—that means I actually have to answer to someone else. That means might actually have to *change*.

But our disdain for authority really tells us two things: that we have convinced ourselves that we are self-sufficient—that we don't really need God or his Word to live life as it was meant to be lived; and that we have bought into the lie that goes all the way back to the garden, that *God is not good*. That the reason he has rules is that he's trying to keep something from us that we would otherwise benefit from or enjoy.

And it tells us a third thing: that we don't understand love. We think that love means someone letting us do whatever we want to do, whatever makes us good about ourselves. But love is wanting what's *best* for someone else, what's going to give life, not take it away—even if they don't understand.

God has given his Word to us in love. He rules us by his Word; the Bible has supreme authority over the church. And every word, every command, every promise, every doctrine, every story—is given out of love. That we might know God; that we might treasure Christ; that we might truly live.

We don't correct the Scriptures; the Scriptures correct us—in love, for our good, for God's glory.