

Berean believers

Introduction

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, 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." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 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. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

(Acts 17:1-15 ESV)

Series on Acts

Paul's missionary journeys. Though he was taking the message to the Gentiles, he started in each town preaching in the Synagogues (to the Jews).

Planted churches in both Thessalonica and Berea (That's how Thessalonians came about, in part because Paul was unable to return).

Bereans historically highly regarded for the way they handled scripture. It appears as if the author (Luke) puts these two passages side by side in part to highlight the differences in approach by these two communities.

Look at 5 ways that the Bereans handled the bible better than the Thessalonians.

1 The bible was their ultimate authority.

"Evangelical" someone who believes that the bible is literally the words of God, and as such is the ultimate authority on all things. Because the bible is God's words, that means to do anything the bible forbids, or to disbelieve the bible is to do what God has forbidden, or to disbelieve God himself.

There are a number of places in the OT that contain the phrase "Thus says the Lord:" indicating that the words that came after were the very words that God had spoken. The Jews regarded part of the OT as the source of their law, meaning that to do anything against it was to be in opposition with God himself. They regarded the prophets as men of God who spoke the very words that God had told them to speak.

Paul himself believed the same thing:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

(2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV)

What Paul means by this is that people who were prepared by God, motivated and helped by the Holy Spirit spoke and wrote using their own personalities in a way that meant the words were the Word of God. This means that God the Holy Spirit inspired not just the general ideas that are written down, but every word of it.

The bible is not written by men with God's help, it's not God dictating words to people, it's not human ideas that God edits and it's not man's wisdom that somehow becomes divine through the works of God. The bible is God's Word, and God's Words, every single one of them.

Jesus regarded the Bible to be God's words. His answers to questions, his way of settling arguments was to say 'it is written...' and recite a passage of the Old Testament. This was meant to communicate that having been written it is unchangeable truth.

Because the bible contains the very words of God himself, they should be our ultimate authority. This means that if anyone says anything contrary to what is in the bible, it should be regarded as being untrue. Similarly, if someone says what is in the bible, it is to be considered to be true.

"What is truth? The holy Scriptures are the only answer to that question. Note, that they are not only true, but the truth itself. We may not say of them that they contain the truth, but that they are the truth

C.H. Spurgeon, Treasury of David.

When Paul spoke to the Thessalonians and the Bereans, he read passages of the OT and explained to them how this applied to Jesus. The problem that the Thessalonians had was that for years their understanding of the OT was different to what Paul was talking about. They had been told that the Messiah/ Christ would be a great King and military leader (just like King David) and would lead them back to the promised land where they would live in peaceful isolation for the rest of their lives.

Paul was fighting against teaching that claimed to be based on scripture, but was a misunderstanding of what was written down. More than that, people through the years had added to what was written down, and what was added was also given authority by the people that were hearing it. The Bible then was no longer their ultimate authority.

We have the same problem sometimes today. The Catholic and Orthodox churches regard the bible as part of a collection of ways that God speaks, and give weight to other teaching as well (including Papal decrees). Methodists and Anglicans believe that the bible is God's teaching, but that tradition, experience and reason have also revealed the timeless will of God. This gives them problems in that they can sometimes give too much weight to tradition and reason and depart from some of the teachings in the bible.

We can be tolerant of divergent opinions, so long as we perceive an honest intent to follow the Statute-book. But if it comes to this, that the Book itself is of small authority to you, then we have no need of further parley: we are in different camps, and the sooner we recognise this, the better for all parties concerned. If we are to have a church of God at all in the land, Scripture must be regarded as holy, and to be had in reverence.

C.H. Spurgeon, A book for Parents and Teachers on the Christian training of Children.

Some churches teach people that drinking alcohol is against the will of God. Not in bible but reasonable? Create rules of behaviour that do not have the bible as their source - creating new sins that God didn't necessarily say himself.

Bereans commended for reading the bible and believing it to be true.

2. They believed in all of the bible.

If the bible contains the very words of God, then it must be true. All of it. Not just the bits we like.

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

(Isaiah 53:3-4 ESV)

Just one of the passages that talks about the need for the Messiah/ Christ to suffer.

The Bereans when they heard this went away and studied it, the Thessalonians appeared to disregard it because it's a bit difficult to understand.

The Bible is all the words of God, that means that all of it is true. There's not a passage in the bible that isn't in some way useful for teaching, correction or training in righteousness. Notice how Paul himself said 'all scripture...'. The truth is though that there's some difficult stuff in there. We have a choice, do we disregard the difficult bits, or do we seek to understand them?

There's not a passage in the bible that we won't preach on, however hard it may be. There's not a word in there that God didn't breathe, and every word of it is true.

Some people have said that it doesn't matter if it's true or not. No-one can find a historical record of a census that meant people travelled to Bethlehem around 6 BC. No-one has yet found archeological evidence for all of the places mentioned in the early OT. But it's true, so they will, and if they don't that doesn't mean it didn't happen, it just means that the records are wrong or that they're digging in the wrong place.

Some of the bible is poetic in its language, like the use of the phrase 'as far as the east is from the west' or 'the four corners of the earth'; some of it is incomplete, like the sermon on the mount or Peter's sermon in Acts 2. We need to be careful to read and interpret it correctly and with this in mind, whilst still acknowledging its authority in all things, and the truth of every word.

3. They believed that they could understand the Bible.

Paul spoke every week in Thessalonica, and every day in Berea. The Thessalonians went to church to wait for someone to open up the bible to them; they leant on someone else's wisdom and interpretation to lead them into finding truth.

We see this attitude today in some churches where the Bible-teaching pastor becomes the source of all knowledge. People with any questions or problems go to the Pastor to ask what they should do with their lives. It's as if their Pastor is speaking the words of God to them himself. The word 'vicar' means a representative, deputy or substitute, and many people regard their leaders in such a way.

Honouring leaders is a good thing to do. Listening to teaching is a good thing to do (when it's biblical!). Believing that other people can help us in our understanding of the bible and the things of God is a good thing to do. BUT the bible is not just God's words to the clever, to the educated, to the leader; it's God's timeless truth, his very words to YOU. Some of it is hard to understand, but the Holy Spirit is on hand to help us understand the difficult bits (and he wrote it after all), but you can read the bible and understand it. The ultimate authority on the things of God is not teaching expanding on the bible, but the bible itself.

The bible is a life-giving, hope-filled, inspiring, inspirational, confrontational, sarcastic, funny, creative, beautiful, uplifting, captivating, enthralling, exciting love letter written by God to you.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;

(Psalm 19:7 ESV)

People have given their lives so that you can read the words of God in your own language. People continue to give up their lives to get the words of God translated into languages that it's not yet translated into. Why?

4. They believed the Bible contained the answers to the questions they had.

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 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.

(Acts 17:10-11 ESV)

Where did they seek answers to their questions? the words of God.

The trouble with religious faith is that it encourages people from a young age to accept rather than challenge, ordering them to place blind trust in an authoritative teacher, parent or priest. It can continue unshaken long past the point where it negatively affects them or their loved ones. As a result we live in a world where millions of children are taught to deny basic aspects of science, and where a couple face five years in prison for failing to seek proper medical care for their baby daughter. That's the faith atheists challenge, and it's not unreasonable, illogical or hypocritical to do so.

Martin Robbins, "Science is not my God", cif

I agree.

There's nothing wrong with asking questions. As a child in the synagogue, that's what Jesus did. In fact he did it all the time. Read one of the gospels and see how often you find Jesus asking questions.

There's nothing wrong with asking questions. It's not a sign of weakness not to understand something. It's not a sign of a lack of faith to want to know how some of the things of God work. I've still got loads of questions. Some of them I've heard answers to but I'm still not comfortable with them. We haven't got all the answers. Anyone who claims to have all the answers is putting themselves alongside God himself, who does have all the answers, and so is making an idol of themselves. If we haven't got all the answers we've still got questions.

It's ok to have questions. When Paul preached in Berea people believed what he was saying was true, but they still had questions they wanted to ask, so they went to the source of all knowledge, God, to see what he had to say.

The Bible doesn't have all the answers to all the questions that we have, but it does contain all that we need to become a christian, to live as a christian and to grow as a christian. It has the answers to the big questions about life, the universe and everything.

There are other books with some good teaching in them, so I don't for a minute suggest that reading the bible alone is a good idea, but reading it as if it's the authority on all things is the best way to be!

5. They knew the Bible was the story of God.

Not only does the bible contain the things we need to know about becoming a christian, living as a christian and growing as a christian, without the bible we would not know these things.

The Bible is God's story. It is the story of how God created the world, how man corrupted it, how God created an solution for their wrongdoing and how he will rule forever. It's the story of salvation. It's the story of Jesus, and not just the NT. It the story of salvation, which means It's my story, and it's your story.

Paul wrote:

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

(Romans 10:17 ESV)

We need God to speak to us to show us who he is, and to explain the significance of what he has done. Without his written word we don't know it. The Bible is the main way that God shows us who he is, what he's like, what he's done, how it affects us and how we should live.

What can we learn from the Bereans' approach?

The Bible is under attack at from many fronts. From people who argue against christianity and believe science to have all the answers for everything and see no need for God to people who doubt the authenticity or authority of the bible.

Do we need to spend our time defending it?

“Defend the Bible? Would you defend a lion? Loose him; and let him go!”

C.H. Spurgeon

People are killed for showing disrespect to the Koran, and to other supposedly holy books. We don't worship a book, we don't deify a book, we honour it as God's words. If you want to argue with it, disrespect it, try to discredit it, try to disprove it, go ahead, it's you that will look foolish.

If you want to know what the fuss is all about, if you want to hear the word of God for all of mankind and for you personally, read the book.