



ISSUE

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Faithful Sayings

BULLETIN
OF THE
OLSEN PARK
CHURCH OF
CHRIST

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

9:30 AM

10:30 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Patrick Ledbetter

Brady McAlister

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Walker McNear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

The Apostle to the Gentiles

By Kyle Pope

After Paul left Philippi, Luke records that Paul passed through Amphipolis, Apollonia, and upon coming to Thessalonica went into the synagogue and taught **“as his custom was”** (Acts 17:1-2, NKJV). While this custom is demonstrated throughout the book of Acts, in Luke’s account of his earlier work in Pisidian Antioch we learn why Paul practiced this custom. When Jews in the city rejected his teaching about Jesus Paul and Barnabas declared to them, **“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”** (Acts 13:46).

Immediately after saying this, Luke records that they applied a text in Isaiah to their own work, telling them further, **“For so the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth’”** (Acts 13:47). In the context of Isaiah, the text was describing the role of the Messiah would play. Isaiah foretold that God would set the Messiah as **“a light to the Gentiles,”** Who would bring (as the Hebrew text puts it) **“My salvation to the ends of the earth”** (Isa. 49:6). Were Paul and Barnabas putting themselves in the place of the Messiah? No, they were drawing the necessary inference from Isaiah’s prophecy that if the Messiah was to bring God’s light and salvation to the Gentiles, His servants are charged to do the same.

Paul took this responsibility quite seriously. He told the Romans he was **“an apostle to the Gentiles”** (Rom. 11:13)—a ministry he *magnified* (NKJV) or *made much of* (NIV). So why wouldn't he go *first* to the Gentiles? Why would he make it his custom to go *first* to Jewish synagogues to preach the gospel? He continued to tell the Romans that he *took pride in* (Wey) his ministry **“if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them”** (Rom. 11:14, NKJV). Let's consider some patterns Paul demonstrates to us about teaching unbelievers (and believers).

1. The Most Obvious Prospects are not Always the Ones Who Accept the Truth. The

Jews knew the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul affirmed, **“the voices of the Prophets . . . are read every Sabbath”** (Acts 13:27). They were awaiting the Messiah. This made them the most obvious prospects to accept the truth about Jesus, but unfortunately many did not. In most instances **“some of them were persuaded”** (Acts 17:4; cf. 17:12; 17:34; etc.), but almost always many rejected the truth. In our day, we might assume that the most likely candidates to accept the truth are those who come from believing families or have some type of faith (even though steeped in denominational error). That isn't always the case. If we *only* pursue these prospects we may miss others whose hearts are a “blank state” free of religious prejudice and preconceptions.

2. Opposition from Those Who Believe Sometimes Presents Opportunities. In Thessalonica **“the Jews who were not persuaded”** (17:5) became *envious* and turned out to be a source of great persecution to Christians throughout Macedonia. This was not the type of *jealousy* Paul hoped to provoke, but in some cases even this served the cause of Christ. Although the converts in Thessalonica had **“received the word in much affliction”** (1 Thess. 1:6), they had **“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”** (1 Thess. 1:9), thus becoming **“examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia”** (1 Thess. 1:7). How Christians respond to the opposition that arises when we try to teach the more obvious prospects can open doors to teach those who are watching us.



Olsen Park Church of Christ

3. The Truth is the Same, but the Starting Points Differ. It is significant to notice how Paul’s approach differs depending upon the background of the prospect or audience. When talking to Jews he pointed to Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (see Acts 13:16-41), but when talking to Gentiles this wasn’t where he started. This makes sense, because he couldn’t expect Gentiles (who did not know the Scriptures) to care about what the Jewish Scriptures foretold. Instead, he started with things to spark their interest. In Athens, he pointed to their own temple **“TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”** (Acts 17:23). He explained His nature (Acts 17:24-28a), quoting one of their own prophet’s claim that **“we are also His offspring”** (Acts 17:28b). Paul wasn’t equating pagan poetry with God’s word. He was establishing connections with those he was teaching. In Lystra, when Paul and Barnabas healed a crippled man the people imagined that they were gods and tried to offer sacrifices to them (Acts 14:9-13). In response, they had to cut through their superstitions and explain limits of their own human nature in contrast to the power of the true and living God (Acts 14:14-18). In Ephesus, Paul worked with those who once practiced magic arts, leading them to reject this and even destroy the books that taught what they once practiced (Acts 19:13-20). When we try to teach unbelievers, although our goal is to lead them to God’s word, we too may have to start with things they understand. There will be superstitions and false ideas they have. Gently and respectfully addressing these erroneous beliefs and contrasting them with the truth can allow us to move them to consider what the Scripture teaches.

4. Have the Courage to Speak the Truth. Although Paul’s approach in teaching Gentiles was often more gentle than his approach to his Jewish brethren, that was not a reflection of timidity. He told the idolaters in Lystra to **“turn from these useless things to the living God”** (Acts 14:15). In Athens, he confessed to the intel-

lectual philosophers of the Areopagus his confidence in a future day of judgment and resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:30-31)—a belief that led some to mock him (Acts 17:32). When Paul taught the Roman governor Felix, he courageously spoke to him **“about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come”** causing Felix to be **“afraid”** and send Paul away (Acts 24:25). Josephus tells that Felix had seduced a married woman to leave her husband and marry him (*Antiquities* 20.7.2). He was living in adultery (Matt. 19:9). He had good reason to fear. Even so, Paul was bold enough to speak the truth. As we teach unbelievers, we will undoubtedly encounter those who practice lifestyles and beliefs that are dramatically opposed to the doctrine of Christ. While we must certainly be gentle and kind as we teach them the truth that will expose the sinfulness of their condition, we must never in our gentleness fail to *speak the truth* to them *in love* (Eph. 4:15). Paul had the courage to tell the truth in all things, and we must do the same.



5. Failure in One Area, Can Lead to Success in Another. An interesting consequence of Paul's custom of going to Jews first, then turning to the Gentiles was the fact that it presented him with unexpected spiritual successes, on the heels of spiritual failures. That is, the rejection of the truth by those who would have been expected to accept it, presented unlikely pros-

pects the opportunity to hear the truth. Paul told the Jews, **"since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles"** (Acts 13:46). Sometimes the fact that one person we teach rejects the truth leads us to become discouraged and fail to even try to teach others. What if Paul had done that? Bro. Norman Sewell tells of a situation he once faced where a man was converted as a result of a correspondence course. Although that man did not remain faithful this led to the man's brother also obeying the gospel. The man's brother became a gospel preacher and has led others to obey the truth. Paul shows us that one person rejecting the truth shouldn't lead us to stop teaching the lost. Sometimes that is the very thing that leads us to the souls who need the truth and will obey it.



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