

Martin Luther and Acts 17: A Crisis in Biblical Authority

Acts 17:1 – 15 (10-12)

Introduction

As many of you know, I enjoy reading and learning history (some of you have been cornered while I rambled on about some obscure figure or situation that I found absolutely fascinating, and I am sure you were trying to figure out how to get away in the most polite way possible). This wasn't a particular interest of mine when I was younger, but it has become quite a hobby, as I have gotten older. Perhaps that is because, as you get older, things that occurred in your own personal experience are now often referred to as *history*.

But in all fairness, the learning of history has a great deal more value than mere entertainment. We have all heard quips like "learning lessons from history," or that "history repeats itself" and there is much truth in these frequently overused clichés. A recent event in American politics illustrates just such a point. Regardless of one's political views, in particular regarding immigration law, the state of Arizona's stance and subsequent rebuttal regarding its borders actually has its roots in long-standing debates in American history. You don't have to read long in the story before you realize this has great overlap with the same conversations that were occurring in the middle 1800's, most prominently in the state of South Carolina. The most novice history student knows where those debates eventually led. But that was not the first time that that topic had been debated in the public arena. Even in the 1780's in the discussion over how the Constitution of "these United States" would be constructed, there was much debate as to the arrangement and hierarchy of the nation to the states. The Federalist papers are one historical document that illustrates the intensity of the debate at that time. Even in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, much ink was spilled between the colonies over the decision whether they wished to form a coalition to challenge what they consider to be unfair governmental entanglements in the livelihood of the colonists. This is just one example of how understanding history and previous historical debate and thought will help frame, shape and allow us to think through issues clearly.

As Christians, we have an obligation to view all of life through the lens of the Scriptures themselves. So as we look at events, issues, problems, and situations that are happening around us, we should be training ourselves to filter them through what the Bible says about life and circumstance. In order to accomplish this well, we need to have skills in understanding what the Bible is saying, as well as skills in analyzing the circumstance. This is where understanding history is helpful. Because the more we assume things are "different" in the current world, upon closer scrutiny we find there is much more "like" than that which is really

different. As much as the way we make a living or the means of transportation has changed, the concept of currency and exchange of money has adjusted, people still think, desire and sin in much the same way as we always have. The issues that confronted people in days gone by may have a different flavor, may have different trappings, the costuming may be unique, but at the root issue, the actual problem, the challenge, the circumstance, the debate, when carefully considered often have very modern counterparts. That is one reason why our use of the Bible is valid. Because even through the context of the delivery of God's message in ancient narrative and poetry, in letters and biography from the first century, among circumstances and wars of ancient kings and nations, we can clearly hear, understand and apply God's word for us even in our "postmodern" age.

This sermon continues a tradition of highlighting a figure in Christian history. We have provided some element of biographical information, highlighting their place in the development of Christian thought and connecting them to an exposition of Scripture that is germane to their circumstance. So this morning, even though many of you might have been looking forward to again being introduced to some obscure figure of middle European history with unique and tongue twisting names such as Balthasar Hubmeier, Jan Hus and Pilgram Markpeck, today we will simply look at two vignettes in the life of Martin Luther. These two scenes we are linking together because of their related, yet subtly distinguishable, themes that are pertinent not only for that day, but also in the current life at Clearcreek Chapel.

Exposition:

Our text in the Book of Acts is a rather small account of an encounter that is familiar to many and has been used frequently, if for nothing else than to provide a "Scriptural" title for a class or classroom in many evangelical settings.

Look back into Acts 15:36 where we see Paul preparing for departure to travel again through the cities of Asia Minor where he and Barnabas had a fruitful ministry planting the gospel in the lives of many Gentiles. We see here in the text that says "and after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'" They had completed a tour of southern Asia Minor where they had proclaimed the gospel with much fruit and much persecution. It now appeared to be wise to go back to those churches and continue to establish them in the teaching of Scripture and encouragement in the faith. Circumstances led to Silas, a leader from Jerusalem, joining Paul on this endeavor. Silas's position accompanying Paul to continue this ministry to the Gentiles, tells us that the relationship between Jerusalem and Antioch was one of affirmation and encouragement.

As we progress through the narrative in chapter 16, Paul visits each of those churches, but his own plans are interrupted. God directed Paul over into Macedonia by means of a special revelation given as a vision. There he was able to begin a ministry on the banks of a river outside of the city of Philippi. Philippi was an important city in the region, being a Roman colony where the inhabitants were actually Roman citizens. Paul and Silas created a bit of a stir in the city, partly because they disrupted a bit of the local economy but also because in their teaching they were proclaiming a kingdom and a king greater than Caesar. After the well-known story of the jailer in Philippi they left and came to what was the capital city of the region, that of Thessalonica.

In this city their conflict was found on two fronts. One was with the Jews in the region as they were proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, but in doing so they also again proclaimed Jesus as the King. Once again offending the Roman sensibilities here in a town desperately clinging to its Roman status (not quite citizens) and the Emperor's patronage. The gospel appears to have been received, with many in the city of believing the message of the gospel and accepting it as the truth. We should read in chapter 17 beginning in verse two "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 in not a few of the leading women."

Opposition again developed by the locals and accusations were made to the city authorities claiming that Paul and Silas were acting against the decrees of Caesar saying that there was another king whose name was Jesus. After a hearing that might have occurred in the city amphitheater, they were able to leave safely. They were escorted to Berea, a town a bit off the main road. In verse 10 we read "and when they arrived they went to 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." Note well that in the preaching of Paul, in his proclamation that Jesus was the culmination of the Hebrew Scriptures, he clearly present Jesus as the fulfillment of all that the Scriptures taught. It was said that many in Philippi and in Thessalonica embraced the gospel, but what we hear from this account of those who believed in Berea is that they were especially zealous to engage the text and ensure that what Paul taught, was indeed in alignment with God's revelation in Holy Scripture (our Old Testament, mind you).

We find out here that they were "more noble" in that they examined the Scriptures daily. Paul was well taught in the Scriptures from a young age. We know from other passages that he was raised in one of the leading rabbinical schools of the day, that he considered himself a "Pharisee of Pharisees," not to

be read as meaning hypocrite of hypocrites, but as one who understood the meaning of Scripture and had a zeal to apply it to the daily life. At this point in his life and ministry I am certain he gave a cogent and compelling presentation of the gospel in the plan of God in Christ. But yet to those in Berea, Paul's skill, background, and abilities did not keep them from making sure that Paul's teaching was indeed under the authority of the Scriptures themselves. Luke, and from inference, Paul, gives tacit approval of this tactic. It was noble and "good" to assess, study and confer on the nature of what they were being presented, that Paul's interpretation of the text did not supersede what was said in the text itself. This affirmation to the truthfulness of the gospel message is an important component in the belief of the gospel. It must be the proper message and it must be accepted as true. But then it must be received, embraced and trusted or it is mere information.

History:

A young monk in the early 1500's was confronted along these lines as well. Recognized at a young age as having significant intellectual gifts, he was pursuing a career in law when the weather led him to a fear of death. Martin Luther gave up a more lucrative direction in life to enter a monastery and study for the priesthood. The particular order that he found himself in called themselves Augustinian because they were committed to promote the teaching of Augustine himself.

Augustinians as an order, even in the sacramentalism of day, emphasized the inability of man to please God and the necessity of grace and the action of God to bring one into "favor" (Martin's struggle along this line can well be the topic for another presentation). Augustinians also pursued a study of the Bible as well as the great "fathers of the church." This approach to "Bible study" found alliance in the renaissance promotion to find knowledge in the actual statements of history, not merely the comments of others. A "return to the sources" was their rallying cry, in Latin, *ad fontes*. This was finding foothold in all of the institutions of higher learning throughout Europe and a new University, with less traditional and clerical ties was founded in Wittenberg. This was where Martin found himself appointed as lecturer in Bible. Here he found a world that was beginning to be open to the study of the Bible itself and a tradition that found this as strength and not a weakness. Indeed his first teaching duties were in the text itself, teaching Psalms, Galatians and Romans with an emphasis on the text and using the fathers as support rather than the principle material. Keep this background in mind as we progress in the story.

Indulgences began as an explanation of the value of material gifts to the church as a means of extending the gospel, particularly for social relief. Quickly they were stripped of any Biblical merit and became a popular means of "buying" grace and providing revenue for both religious and secular projects. The indulgence system was based on a number of assumptions. One of which is that

Christ's virtues and merit is infinite and, with the spare merit that was accumulated by those who would later be called saints, was available to be dispensed through the "Vicar of Christ" on earth, that is through the Pope and the Church. A grant from this treasury of merit was often used to shorten the time spent doing further penance in purgatory was written as an indulgence. Christians would then show gratitude for this declaration by a thank offering. Officially they were offerings given from repentant hearts with the money often going to some element of welfare relief. Because quickly in the minds of many people (as well as in many preachers) they were purchasing this merit for themselves and for their families, the system and enterprise of indulgences had become quite corrupt.

In 1515 Pope Leo X had issued such an "indulgence." Gifts for this set of indulgences were arranged to help fund the completion of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome as well as pay off a debt for the purchase of an archbishop position by one named Albrecht. Most of the money was being forwarded on to a banking family in the Netherlands who had orchestrated and funded this combined project.

Johan Tetzel was a Dominican friar (rivals to the Augustinians were the Dominicans) and was quite gifted in oratorical skill. He is known for quotes like "won't you part with even a farthing to buy this letter? It won't bring you money but rather a divine and immortal soul, whole and secure in the kingdom of heaven." He once boasted that he had saved more souls by indulgences than St. Peter had in preaching the gospel. He has been attributed this jingle (translated into English): "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." He arrived in a town with all pomp and appealed to his hearer's conscience with statements as this: "Don't you hear the voice of your wailing dead parents and others who say, 'have mercy upon [us]...we are in severe punishment and pain...why are you so cruel and harsh that you do not want to save us, though it only takes so little? You let us lie in flames so that only slowly do we come to the promised glory.'"

Even though Martin probably did not hear Tetzel's preaching directly, many in his town had traveled to hear him speak and were enamored with this idea. Martin was appalled at this blatant contradiction to the teaching of Scripture. At first Martin only objected to the way that indulgences were being presented. It was an affront to his Augustinian thinking on grace, and he went to his sources to clarify his conflict with them. He found indulgences wanting, not only in method of presentation, but also in the basis for them altogether. He put his thinking in the form of points for debate and sent them to Albrecht, the archbishop, as a challenge for formal debate. Albrecht forwarded them on to the Pope in Rome (he had a bit of a conflict of interest). Martin also likely posted them on the door of the Chapel, a sort of "public bulletin board." From there they were printed and published throughout Europe in a short span and fueled a spirit that challenged the established authority in many circles.

Martin Luther's intent was to cause debate not to create a revolution. Because of his teaching and his involvement in the Scriptures, he was well aware that the Scriptures should be the ground for practice and thinking. He was willing to challenge a time-honored practice of the church where it clearly seemed to him to contradict the message of the gospel. It is not clear even from reading Martin's own biographical account, whether he truly embraced the gospel himself at this point or not. But we do know that he had an understanding of the gospel and was committed to a solid approach towards the authority of the Scripture.

Reflect and Respond:

Tonight we will look further into Martin Luther's life but we wanted to introduce this in this way this morning. What do we learn from these two seemingly unrelated stories one involving Paul the apostle with a group of believers in the town of Berea and a Middle Ages monk named Martin Luther teaching Scriptures in a town in central Germany? I wish to suggest a few responses.

We should first of all formally affirm in our minds that it is God, through the Bible who has authority over our lives. And we affirm this because we recognize that it is in the Scriptures that God has revealed himself and his will to us. Therefore to stand on any other ground, of reason, of tradition, of personal experience, is to challenge God himself.

Secondly, if we affirm that the Bible has authority over our lives, then we should make a more concerted and intentional effort to understand it and apply it correctly. This does not mean that we should grab a hold of a few choice and favorite verses, but that we should make special effort to understand the entire storyline that affirms that it is in Jesus and the Gospel that God's plan finds its fulfillment and focus.

And lastly, we should look carefully around us, at our lives, at our family structure, at the way that we make decisions, at the formalities and institutions of our church, to make sure that they are in alignment with the Scriptures and the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This comes in two propositions. One, make sure that it is the gospel that you have embraced. Make sure that it is in the message of the remedy for sin found in the coming, death and resurrection of Christ that you are trusting in for your life now and to come. But also make sure that it is in the gospel, in trusting in the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit to empower encourage and change your life each day. You will be confronted with many competing and oppositional messages, will you be noble enough to search the Scriptures daily and see whether it is true?