



Potomac Hills Community Church, PCA

GRACE ORIENTED • CHRIST CENTERED

Rev. David V. Silvernail, Jr.

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The Acts of the Apostles: The Spirit sends the Church with the Gospel Acts 17.1-15 The Gospel turns the World Upside Down

INTRODUCTION: “*Preaching the Word of God*”^{1 2}

I’ve been serving communion here for over seven years, and many times, when I’ve served the bread, I’ve read this verse, **Colossians 1:22**, “*But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*” (NIV)

And since we’re having communion today, I thought this would be a good passage to open up with, particularly since I think that it relates very well to the main passage today in Acts 17.

But first we’re going to spend a little time in Colossians 1. You see, that communion verse is part of a much larger passage, a majestic passage where the Apostle Paul is writing to the church about the task of preaching the Word of God.

Listen to it carefully, from the English Standard Version ... **Colossians 1:22-29**, “*He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, [23] if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. [24] Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church, [25] of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, **to make the word of God fully known**, [NASB - that I might fully carry out **the preaching of the word of God**] [26] the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints. [27] To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of **this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.***”

1 Introduction and conclusion adapted from the chapter “*The Primacy of Preaching*,” by Dr. R. Albert Mohler, found in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, pages 4-27.

2 NLT = New Living Translation, ESV = English Standard Version, NIV = New International Version, NASB = New American Standard Bible

*[28] Him we proclaim, warning [NIV, NASB – admonishing] everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone **mature [NASB – complete, NKJV - perfect] in Christ.** [29] For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.” (ESV)*

In our presbytery, we have a committee that deals with any problems or issues that come up with our churches or our ministers. If there is a ministry issue that presbytery needs to get involved with, this is the committee that handles it.

The committee is known by its acronym – CMMW. Its full name is The Committee on the Minister and the Ministry of the Word. And that’s what this passage is about, the Minister and the Ministry of the Word. And Acts 17 shows us the Minister and the Ministry of the Word in action.

Last week, Mo Leverett taught us about the lost art of redemptive suffering. How, since Christ suffered to redeem us, we should be ready and willing to endure suffering in order to redeem others. And that’s pretty much what Paul says here in **Colossians 1:24**, *“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church.”* He explains why he endures such suffering, and why he not only endures the suffering, but, of all things, rejoices in these sufferings. Not something that most of us are quick to put on our resumes – “rejoices in suffering.”

But Paul does. Why? Because these sufferings have earned him the opportunity for the preaching of the Gospel ... the preaching of the Word of God. He understands himself as a minister of the Word, and he sees his purpose on earth as one of preaching this Word and proclaiming Jesus Christ.

And that is exactly what he does in Acts 17. Notice the verbs he uses in this passage; interpreting, explaining, proving, telling, professing, teaching, and preaching. That is what Paul did, ***“making the word of God fully known.”***

Turn with me to ...

Acts 17:1-15, *“Now Paul and Silas traveled through the towns of Amphipolis [am-hip-olis] and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. [2] As was Paul's custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row **he interpreted the Scriptures to the people.** [3] **He was explaining and proving the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and His rising from the dead.** He said, **“This Jesus I'm telling you about is the Messiah.”** [4] Some who listened were persuaded and became converts, including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city.*

[5] But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they gathered some worthless fellows from the streets to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd. [6] Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers

instead and took them before the city council. "Paul and Silas have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city," they shouted. [7] "And Jason has let them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, Jesus."

[8] The people of the city, as well as the city officials, were thrown into turmoil by these reports. [9] But the officials released Jason and the other believers after they had posted bail.

*[10] That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the synagogue. [11] And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. **They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth.** [12] As a result, many Jews believed, as did some of the prominent Greek women and many men.*

[13] But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. [14] The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. [15] Those escorting Paul went with him to Athens; then they returned to Berea with a message for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him."

Now, if you remember from a few weeks ago, Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke, our Gospel quartet, had moved across Asia Minor, both led and restrained by the Holy Spirit. Finally, from the coast of Troas, the winds carried them to Samothrace to Neapolis to Philippi, where they were privileged to meet *the man from Macedonia*, who, as it turned out, was a woman named Lydia.

And she heard the Gospel, the Lord opened her heart, and she came to Christ, along with her entire household. And it was experiences like that which caused Paul to write in **Romans 1:16**, "*For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—Jews first and also Gentiles.*"

And the Gospel came to Europe for the first time. And the first flag planted in Roman territory was planted in the heart of a woman named Lydia. That's the Gospel. That's the Grace of God.

And despite persecution and hardship, God was graciously working, and people came to the saving knowledge of Christ through the preaching of the Word.

And Acts 17 shows us how and why that happens.

We start by noting that ...

v. 1-3: PREACHING NEEDS REAL CONTENT³

³ The exposition of the text is adapted from *Preaching the Word: Acts* by R. Kent Hughes, pages 221-228; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 13-28* by John MacArthur, pages 1136-125. Some of the Greek word definitions come from *Word Pictures in the New Testament* by A.T. Robertson.

Many believe that though the church of Jesus Christ has had many princes, the Apostle Paul stands above them all — that Paul is the greatest son of the church — the noblest servant she’s ever produced. His words in **Philippians 3:10**, *“I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death”* (NIV) are as forceful an expression of love as any in the Scriptures. This was the driving force of Paul’s life. The list of Paul’s sufferings in **2 Corinthians 11** is mind-boggling. If anyone questioned the apostle’s sincerity, he could point to the scar tissue on his face and back. He was willing to suffer for Christ and for others because he loved them. Regarding his people, the Jews, he said, **Romans 9:3**, *“for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.”*

He was willing to go to **hell** so they might go to heaven.

We marvel at the massive intelligence that could write the closely reasoned pages of Romans and the lyrical chapter of 1 Corinthians 13.

Permeating all he did and all he wrote was his supreme passion for the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul put everything he had into living (and dying) for Christ. He was alive for Christ! As he said in **Philippians 1:20-21**, *“...as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* (ESV)

Paul and Silas and Timothy and Luke did not leave Philippi with their tails between their legs. They left at their own pace, saying goodbye to a new church that contained, among others, the wealthy Lydia and her family, the Philippian jailer and his household, and an ex-demon possessed, clairvoyant, slave girl.

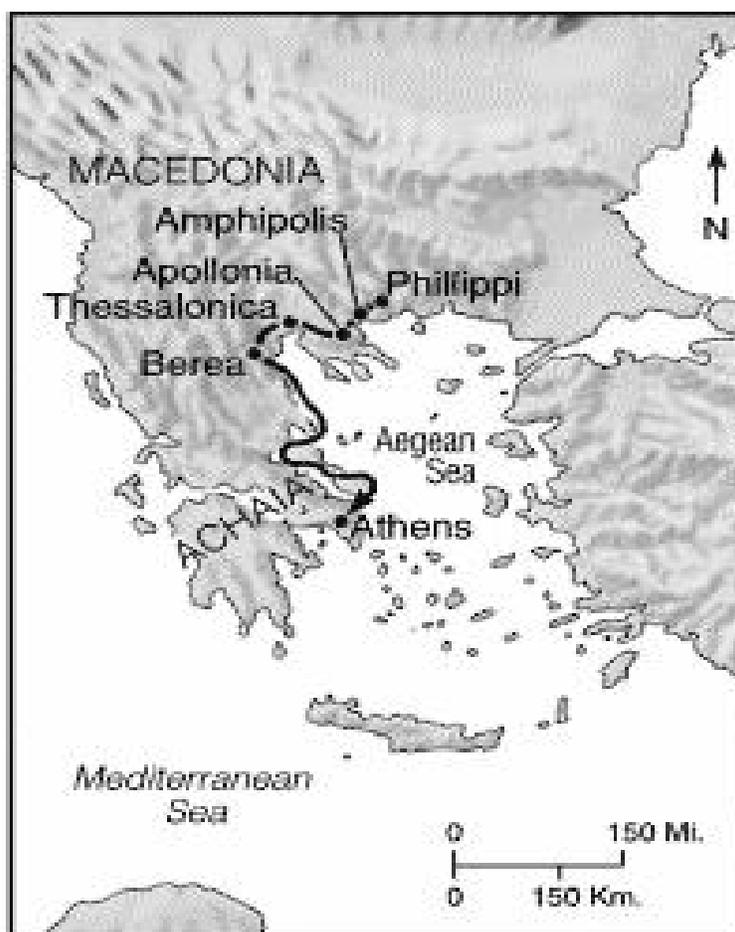
A woman, a gentile, and a slave – great people to build a church on.

But now it was time to move on, verse 1, *“Now Paul and Silas traveled through the towns of Amphipolis [am-hip-olis] and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.”*

This was at least a three-day journey of about 100 miles.

When they arrived, they found a thriving city of about 20,000.

And unlike Philippi, there was a synagogue, where they went first.



Picking up the story in verse 2, “As was Paul’s custom, he went to the synagogue service, and for three Sabbaths in a row he **interpreted** the Scriptures to the people. [NIV – **reasoned** with them from the Scriptures] [3] He was **explaining** and **proving** the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and His rising from the dead. He said, “This Jesus I’m **telling** you about [NIV - **proclaiming** to you] is the Messiah.”

Paul’s ministry of the Word was three-pronged.

First, “he *interpreted the Scriptures to the people.*” The NIV translates that as, “*reasoned with them from the Scriptures.*”

The Greek word translated “interpreted” or “reasoned” is the root for our English word ‘dialogue.’ There was exchange between Paul and the people, questions and answers. He dialogued with them “from the Scriptures.” They would together take up the Scriptures, and Paul would select a passage and submit it for give and take. Just put it out there and start dealing with it.

And as part of this dialogue, there was “explaining,” as verse 3 indicates.

This word literally means “opening.” And it’s a very strong word; Luke used it in **Luke 24:31-32** to describe the spiritual opening on the road to Emmaus,

*“Suddenly, their eyes were **opened**, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared! They said to each other, “Didn't our hearts feel strangely warm as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?””*

Paul opened the Scriptures with clarity and simplicity — a virtue that’s not always appreciated. A freshman student once remarked after hearing a sermon by the great preacher George Truett, “So that is George Truett, is it? Huh, he didn’t use one word I couldn’t understand.”

Simplicity can make all the difference between communication and confusion. “Hence from my sight — nor let me thus pollute mine eyes with looking on a wretch like thee, thou cause of my ills; I sicken at thy loathsome presence” is fine for Shakespeare, but in most situations today, “Leave!” works a whole lot better.

We have the greatest message on earth, but sometimes the gospel is hidden to those who are perishing simply because of our verbiage. Not so with Paul. He opened and explained the Scriptures so it was understandable.

The third prong of his method is stated as “proving” or “giving evidence” (NASB), which means “to place beside” or “to set before.” And it says that he did **this** from *“the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and His rising from the dead.”* He proved his interpretations and explanation to them using the Old Testament. “Have you considered the testimony of Hosea?”

“Then there’s the story of Abraham and Isaac ...”

He was proving his case, preaching to lead his hearers to a particular verdict. The message was that Christ (the Messiah) had to suffer. No doubt Paul took them to many Scriptures, including Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53.

Psalm 22:1, *“My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”*

Psalm 22:7, *“Everyone who sees me mocks me. They sneer and shake their heads”*

Psalm 22:16, *“My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs; an evil gang closes in on me. They have pierced my hands and feet.”*

Psalm 22:18, *“They divide my clothes among themselves and throw dice for my garments.”*

And then the famous passage of **Isaiah 53:4-8**, *“Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins! [5] But he was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed! [6] All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the guilt and sins of us all. [7] He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did*

not open his mouth. [8] From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins—that he was suffering their punishment?”

With these and many other Old Testament Scriptures, Paul taught that Christ had to suffer, die and be buried, and then rise again from the dead. As he later wrote to the church in Corinth, **1 Corinthians 15:3-4**, *“I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me—that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and He was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said.”*

Paul exhibited great patience and care, taking the time to complete his three-pronged attack and to call for a heart response. The text indicates that Paul was in the synagogue for three Sabbaths, and he probably ministered in that area for much longer than that. He didn’t coerce them. He didn’t shout at them. He didn’t hit ‘em over the head with the Bible. He didn’t threaten them.

He tried to win them over with reason and with persuasive arguments.

Paul treated the people with respect and dignity. He didn’t demand that they swallow what he said simply because he said it. In sharing our faith we must give others room to think. The Gospel dialogued, opened, and placed before others will always stand on its own! And this approach is Biblical!

The Apostle Peter said in **1 Peter 3:15**, *“Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But you must do this in a gentle and respectful way.”*

And notice this was not a one-shot approach. He didn’t throw a Gospel tract at them and then leave; he stayed, interpreting, explaining, proving, telling, professing, teaching, and preaching the Word of God. That is what Paul did, **“making the word of God fully known.”**

Paul’s approach wasn’t easy; it cost him. His persistence and honest integrity in dialogue and sharing made him terribly vulnerable, so that he often encountered agonizing opposition. In **1 Thessalonians 2:1-2** he reminds the believers here, *“You yourselves know, dear brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not a failure. You know how **badly** we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we **suffered** there. Yet our God gave us the courage to declare His Good News to you boldly, even though we were surrounded by many who **opposed** us.”*

You see, when you preach God’s Word with real content about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you’ll discover, as Paul knew well, that ...

v. 5-10a, 13-15: PREACHING BRINGS REAL CONFLICT

Starting with verse 5, *“But the Jewish leaders were jealous, so they gathered some **worthless fellows** from the streets to form a mob and start a riot. They*

attacked the home of Jason, searching for Paul and Silas so they could drag them out to the crowd."

Some of the Jews rejected Paul and, having become inflamed with a misplaced zeal, went to the center of town and recruited a mob. Our text calls them "worthless fellows." Other versions refer to them as "wicked men," "bad characters," "evil men," "worthless bums," and best of all, the *King James* says, "lewd fellows of the baser sort."

Adam Clarke's Commentary on the New Testament says, "These were probably a low kind of lawyers, attorneys without principle, unprincipled men employed to denounce the apostles, wicked men of the forensic tribe."

Soon Thessalonica was in an uproar, and these "worthless fellows" descended on the home of Jason. Luke goes on in verse 6, "*Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers instead and took them before the city council.*"

Paul and Silas were gone, giving the lynch mob an opportunity to pay them an unwitting but immortal compliment, "***Paul and Silas have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city,***" *they shouted. [7] "And Jason has let them into his home. They are all guilty of treason against Caesar, for they profess allegiance to another king, Jesus."*

They were complaining by saying, "These men have turned the world upside-down." And in one sense, what they said was true, though in its natural state the world is already upside-down. The world was turned wrong-side-up at the Fall and has been going in reverse ever since. So when men and women in Thessalonica were turned around by Christ, everyone else saw them as upside-down. A follower of Christ lives right-side-up in a topsy-turvy world.

At first, the rulers caved into the mob, but soon they realized they had no evidence by which to hold them, so, verse 8, "*The people of the city, as well as the city officials, were thrown into turmoil by these reports. [9] But the officials released Jason and the other believers after they had posted bail. [10] That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea.*"

This must have been disheartening for these messengers of Christ. A short time later Paul wrote the believers there, **1 Thessalonians 2:17**, "*Dear brothers and sisters, after we were separated from you for a little while (though our hearts never left you), we tried very hard to come back because of our intense longing to see you again.*"

So Paul left for Berea, but he left behind, in spite of opposition, a small but growing number of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ; A few Jews believed, along with an impressive number of God-seeking Greeks, including a number of prominent women. A church was beginning to form in Thessalonica.

But that just made the opposition worse, so much so, that when Paul went to Berea, his persecutors followed him there, verse 13, *“But when some Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea, they went there and stirred up trouble. [14] The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. [15] Those escorting Paul went with him to Athens; then they returned to Berea with a message for Silas and Timothy to hurry and join him.”*

Well, Paul’s second missionary journey has gone swell so far. He went to Philippi in Acts 16 where he was beaten and thrown into prison. He then goes to Thessalonica where his preaching starts a riot, and then he moves on to Berea, and he gets chased out of town ... all because he was preaching the Word of God.

Preaching needs real content: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But when the message **is Christ**, then preaching brings real conflict.

However, Paul kept at it, because he knew that ...

v. 4, 10b-12: PREACHING MAKES REAL CONVERTS

We saw that in Thessalonica in verse 4, *“Some who listened were persuaded and became **converts**, including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city.”*

So despite all the conflict, people came to Christ. They heard the message and they responded in faith, as **Romans 10:17** says, *“Yet faith comes from listening to this message of good news—the Good News about Christ.”*

And that’s exactly what happened everywhere Paul went to preach. There was **conflict** in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, but there were also **converts** in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. And wherever the Word was preached, a church was formed. And we get to see that in a little bit more detail in Berea, picking up in verse 10, *“When they arrived there, they went to the synagogue. [11] And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth.”*

They listened “eagerly” to the preaching of God’s word. Their “eagerness” carries the idea of rushing forward. They couldn’t wait to hear God’s message! Eagerness to know God’s Word makes all the difference in the quality of our Christian lives. All of us should be constantly reading, digging, cross-referencing, comparing — rushing with eagerness to feed on the Word of God!

The Bereans were “*more open-minded*” or as some versions say, “*noble minded*” or “*fair-minded*” because they “*searched the Scriptures day after day to check up on Paul and Silas, to see if they were really teaching the truth.*”

They listened eagerly but they listened cautiously, comparing everything to the Scriptures. Acceptance of teaching without discernment is **not** a good thing.

Luke **congratulated** the Bereans because they were willing to look into the Scriptures for themselves. If we listen uncritically to any preacher, we are in danger of being misled. Every preacher makes mistakes, and the good ones are open to correction. But the correction has to come from Scripture. I've said many times that you can challenge anything I say up here. You can challenge anything any pastor or elder says up here. But you have to do it from the same source, the Bible. Because I really don't care what TIME magazine, Oprah, Dr. Phil, or whatever freak-of-the-week show had to say about it.

If you're going to challenge a teacher of God's Word, then you have to be like the Bereans, and be willing to search the Scriptures first.

The Christian life can be the most exciting when we allow ourselves to be learning, continually immersing ourselves in the Scriptures. God's Word will keep us in touch with the fundamental issues of life and keep us growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The outcome of all this was predictable, verse 12, *"As a result, many Jews believed, as did some of the prominent Greek women and many men."*

And a new church was born in Berea! Their lives had been turned upside-down, or, more accurately, right-side-up. God's people had their lives radically changed. They loved doctrines they once despised and now saw themselves and life as it really is. Once their thoughts were devoted to this world, but now they looked to the next world. As Paul later wrote in **Colossians 3:1**, *"Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God's right hand in the place of honor and power."*

The Word of God had come alive. They were, in the words of **Hebrews 6:5**, *"...those who have tasted the goodness of the word of God ..."*

They rushed to taste it, and it satisfied their souls.

This can happen anywhere! It happened among the Thessalonians. Listen to what Paul wrote a short time later, **1 Thessalonians 1:6-8**, *"So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. As a result, you yourselves became an example to all the Christians in Greece. And now the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere, even beyond Greece, for wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God."*

The power of the Word of God had changed lives, and in the eyes of the world, turned them upside-down.

CONCLUSION:

The Apostle Paul says, back where we started in Colossians 1, *"I became a minister ... to make the word of God fully known."*

I became a minister, not of some hypothetical, non-problematic, non-

controversial church. I became a minister of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the body of Christ on earth, a chosen, purchased possession being sanctified even in the present, and struggling against the powers of sin and death and evil and darkness.” And so why do we preach?

*“That we may present everyone **mature in Christ.**”*

If you are looking for results in terms of statistics, numbers, and visible responses, there are other mechanisms, other programs, and other means that will produce those things quicker than the preaching of God’s Word.

The only question is whether or not those other means enable us to *“present everyone mature in Christ.”*

The Apostle Paul was determined to carry out his ministry of preaching the Word of God, and he did so in the face of the tyranny of the practical, the tyranny of the popular, and the tyranny of the persecutor, because his confidence was in the Word of God. As seen in the *“the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints.”* This mystery was revealed by God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, *“which is, Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*

This, after all, is not what the world expects to hear. It is not a message they will hear anywhere else. It is powerful, but not always popular.

And as Paul found out, it can lead to uproar and riot.

But out of that darkness, out of that confusion, out of that depravity, out of that backwardness, and out of that ignorance, comes the shining light of the Gospel, leading men and women who, **somehow**, received that Gospel by faith and whose lives would be forever changed.

Such is the grace of Christ received by faith. The only function of faith is to respond to grace. Faith takes what grace offers.

No matter who you are or what you have done.

Because it’s all of **Grace** from beginning to end, and it’s all of Grace because it’s all of Christ, and it’s **“Him we proclaim.”**

And all who believe it said, “Amen.”