



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Scripture or Sharing?

“We have a strong heritage as a people devoted to Bible study, a heritage reflected in our devotion to Bible School. Today our heritage is at risk. Through neglect and distracting preoccupations with technique and relevance, we have forgotten what gave our Sunday Schools their power: they were Bible schools. – Gary Holloway, “From Scripture to Sharing: Sunday Schools in Churches of Christ,” *Christian Studies* 12 (1992), 47

On My Website

- Click [here](#) for the notes, recording links, and bibliography from my two-part class at the recent Harding Lectures: “**The New Testament Canon: Authoritative Books or Mandated Collection?**” You’ll also find the manuscript, slides, and link to my virtual lecture on the canon (Harding, 2020) and an older three-part series.
- “**Have You Still No Faith?**” — latest [posting](#) in my series of **Mark Studies** (4.35-41).

In God’s Good Time

“If there is one thing which should be quite plain to those who accept the revelation of God in Nature and the Bible it is that He is never in a hurry.” - J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (Macmillan Paperbacks, 1961), 55

Paul’s Defense Strategy: A Case Study

David Anguish

After taking note of the fact that “*both* religious belief *and* skepticism are on the rise” in the West, Timothy Keller observed, “Christians should reflect on the fact that such large sectors of our formerly large Christian societies have turned their backs on faith. Surely that should lead to self examination.”¹ Included in that scrutiny should be evaluation of how our effort to engage our culture compares with that of the first disciples as they met their incredulous and hostile Jewish and Greco-Roman audiences.

Especially worth noting is their understanding that they had to *convince* people about Christ before they could *convert* people to him. For instance, consider Paul’s defense (ἀπολογίαμαι, *apologeomai*; Acts 26.1-2, 24) to the governor Festus and King Herod Agrippa II against the accusations of his Jewish accusers. In Acts 26.19-29, we see the following:

- It was a consistent effort; since Damascus he had been obedient to God in calling Jews and Gentiles to repent, turn to God, and perform deeds in keeping with repentance (vv. 19-20).
- He responded to the charges against him by continuing to testify (μαρτύρομαι, *marturomai*; v. 22) that the Christian faith fulfilled the expectations of Moses and the prophets (vv. 21-23).
- When Festus, who was new to the region, found his claims to be ludicrous, Paul appealed to Agrippa to confirm that the events he was describing had in fact occurred and could be verified (vv. 24-26).
- His aim was to persuade as many people as possible that the claims of the Christians were true (vv. 27-29).

Paul’s defense strategy presents us with a framework we can employ in our effort to prepare and present an apology to our world. But before we look at its details, we should note that it presumed Paul’s intention to embrace opportunities to respond to skeptics and critics (v. 26; cf. Acts 17.16-17).

At the heart of his effort was the understanding that his preaching should be believed and Christ’s way followed as the

Style vs. Substance

“There is also a deceptive element to style, when the subject is addressed agreeably and at length, with a certain contrived gravity. When singers are accompanied by flutes, the audience does not notice their mistakes: *in the same way, an elaborate and prepossessing style dazzles the hearer and blinds him to the actual subject being explained.* . . . This is the fare with which such lectures satiate the speakers: they are admired so long as they are giving pleasure, and then as soon as the pleasure of listening has evaporated, their reputation forsakes them; one party has wasted their time, the other their life.” - Plutarch, *On Listening* 42d-e, Plutarch Essays, trans. Robin Waterfield (Penguin Books, 1992), 35-36; my emphasis

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“An apologetic for the people of postmodernity must place the concept of truth at the center of all its endeavors.” - Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 163

Resource for Basics

Looking for a resource to help someone new to the Bible or in need of a review of the basics?

My book, ***Getting Acquainted with the Bible: Its Makeup, Purpose, and Story*** is useful . . .

- For church youth & adult classes
- To give to novice students for evangelism or newcomer studies
- For prison ministries or similar settings where basic Bible knowledge may be minimal
- For introduction courses in Christian high schools or universities (review & discussion questions after each chapter)

Click [here](#) to learn how to receive review copies and/or bulk order discounts or read sample pages.

correct response to events that had really occurred (see Acts 25.19); in Acts 26 he specified the historical events of Jesus’ suffering, resurrection, and commission (vv. 22-23). This was a bold and, in a sense, risky claim, for in making it Paul was inviting his hearers to challenge the veracity of real events, an invitation many accepted. While that meant he could not fabricate the story or any of its events, it also required him to be careful not to misstate details, be sloppy in his interpretation of them, or overstate what the evidence showed. If what he said did not prove to be true, the faith he proposed would be discredited. He had to know and present his case well.

Paul’s reliance on real events also affected his persuasion method. Since he was asking people to change their outlook and lives because of real events, he had to focus first on the *reasons* they should believe (cf. Acts 17.2-4), not cater to what Plutarch called “the pleasure of listening” derived from hearing a speaker with a dazzling style (cf. 1 Cor 2.1-4).² Once the reasons were accepted, the requisite trust, behaviors, and feelings would follow. But if the reasons could not be verified, his hearers were right to pursue different behaviors and promises of fulfillment (cf. 1 Cor 15.17-19, 29-32).

To employ Paul’s strategy requires a commitment to gaining an increasingly thorough knowledge of God’s word and plan and the skill to correctly interpret and apply it. That requires more than memorizing a set of selected verses, doctrines, and answers. We should seek to keep growing in our understanding of how the specific events that gave rise to our faith fit into both the larger story the Bible tells and the historical context of the era in which the events occurred. This allows us to provide important texture that lifts the events “off the page” as it were. And like Paul in Athens, we also need to look firsthand at what those with questions—and criticisms—are saying so we can prepare the apt response (Acts 17.16-17; 26.16-18, 22-23; cf. Luke 24.44-49; Isa 35.5; 42.7; etc.).

Complete mastery of all we will need to know is beyond any one of us. Thankfully, we are part of a body that includes other members who will hopefully accept the challenge and engage with us in mutual support (1 Cor 12.14-31).

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Notes

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in An Age of Skepticism* (Riverhead Books, 2008), xvi-xvii.

² Plutarch, *On Listening* 42d-e, Plutarch Essays, trans. Robin Waterfield (Penguin Books, 1992), 35-36. See complete quotation in the sidebar at left.

All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.

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