

Defending the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, friends, and welcome to any newcomers and visitors with us as well this morning. It's great to be with you. Please do keep that Bible reading open in front of you, and hopefully you'll find an outline of my talk as well inside the bulletins, if that's useful for following along.

I mentioned a quote from Martin Luther a couple of weeks ago, and I wonder if we could get it up straight away, Daryl. He said, I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word, Otherwise I did nothing.

And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it.

I did nothing. The Word did everything. I love that quote. I think it would be hard to summarize the book of Acts more succinctly than that.

The Word did everything. Acts is divided into seven sections. Seven major panels, if you like. I don't know if you can quite read all that, but each panel ends in a brief summary statement, a kind of report on how things are going, about the progress of the Word, how the Lord is building His church through His Word, or some statement to that effect.

[1 : 1 8] So I won't go through all the summary statements, but just listen to chapter 6, verse 7, for instance. As the gospel is about to burst forth from the city of Jerusalem, Luke tells us, And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

That's how Luke wraps up that kind of section in Jerusalem. Or again in chapter 12, verse 24, at the end of the fourth panel, which has seen the gospel smash down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, as Peter goes to the house of Cornelius and so on, Luke finishes that section in chapter 12, verse 24, by saying, But the Word of God increased and multiplied.

Now over the last few weeks, we've been working our way through Paul's second and third missionary journeys, focused on Macedonia and Greece, and particularly Asia. That's Asia Minor, which we would now call Turkey.

And you remember a couple of weeks ago, things seemed to be going really well in Asia. And rounding out that section in chapter 19, verse 20, Luke says, So the Word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

You see, Luke's point is that the Word is doing everything, and it's spreading like wildfire around the Mediterranean. And the name of the Lord Jesus is becoming well known and gaining admiration.

[2 : 4 3] So you see how the book is structured. It's punctuated by these little updates, these brief summaries about the increase of the Word, and as the Word increases, the number of disciples increases too.

So it's a very optimistic book about the unstoppable advance of the Gospel, the power of the Gospel. The Gospel is always on the front foot, as it were, making great strides.

And yet, as we move into chapter 19, and into this final section of the book, a new piece of vocabulary gets introduced. It's somewhat striking, actually. We haven't seen it used at all before in the rest of the book.

But all of a sudden, Luke starts talking about apologia, defense. He uses this word eight times in this final section.

Seven times, it comes up on the lips of Paul, or with reference to him. Now, I don't want to overplay this, of course. This is not the first time we've seen Paul or the Gospel under attack.

[3 : 45] But I do think it just hints at a shift in the narrative. One of the big questions Luke wants us to focus on in this last section, if not the big question, is can the Gospel be defended?

And part and parcel with that is, can Paul's ministry be defended? See, in many ways, I think the whole tenor of the book so far has been offensive. The Gospel is going out, breaking down barriers, attacking idolatry.

But now, it's almost as if Paul's offensive ministry across the Mediterranean is about to catch up with him. There are a growing number of powerful people who want him out of the way, who want him dealt with.

And you can see why, for the average Roman citizen, it may well have looked like Paul was a bit of a troublemaker. I mean, he's been causing civil unrest, economic chaos, he's throwing the world into turmoil, he doesn't seem to have respected Artemis very recently, have been very multicultural.

Back in chapter 17, when Paul was in Thessalonica, and the mob got a hold of Jason and some of the other brothers, and they dragged them before the city authorities, do you remember what they said?

[5 : 00] Shouting, Luke tells us, they said, these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also. And Jason has received them, and they're 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. Paul has been disturbing people everywhere. Do you see the question, can this gospel be defended?

Can Paul's ministry be defended? Is the gospel good for people? Is it good for society? Or is it really just a source of trouble and chaos? And I think these are wonderfully relevant questions for our own day, don't you?

As once again, Christians are being accused of bringing trouble upon society because we're racist and imperialistic and colonial, bigoted, old-fashioned, oppressive, something like that.

Surely we have to have an answer to these kinds of accusations, don't we? Can we defend ourselves? Can we defend the Christian message? So Luke begins this final section of his book in chapter 19, verse 21, as Paul is about to go on several trials defending himself.

[6 : 13] He writes, Now after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I've been there, I must also see Rome.

This provides, as it were, an itinerary for the rest of the book of Acts. It's about Paul's missionary plans, Macedonia and Achaia, and then on to Rome. Except that what we're going to see is that Paul ends up going to Rome in chains.

When he arrives back in Jerusalem, he gets arrested. He ends up going to Rome as a Roman prisoner. Not as a free missionary entrepreneur, if you like, but as a defendant on trial.

Can he defend himself? And can he make a defense for the gospel? Is Paul just a troublemaker? Or is there any good reason why Paul has been causing such a stir?

So, as we work our way through this passage this morning, I want to point out seven features of Paul's ministry that I think Luke is showing us that he wants us to know what Paul was about, why he did what he did, why Theophilus, who the book is written to, and why we can trust Paul and his message.

[7 : 27] And although I don't want to steal too much from next week's passage, I think it's just worth mentioning how chapter 20 works as a whole, which is to say that this week we see Paul doing ministry, if you like, whereas next week we see Paul explaining his ministry to the Ephesian elders, which just makes it a very useful little chapter, you see.

What did Paul do? Of course we need to know that. But then also, how did Paul explain his actions to the Ephesian elders? And what did Paul expect them to do? And just picking up on some of the questions we've had recently and been thinking about, I think this is one of the keys to carefully navigating that description to prescription kind of pathway.

So for instance, we're going to see Paul do an extraordinary miracle in this week's chapter. But next week, Paul doesn't talk to the Ephesian elders at all about doing miracles, raising the dead or Eutychus or anything like that.

Because I think that's something that he himself did as an apostle, but he didn't expect them to do that. So, for instance, our first feature of gospel ministry, which he does talk with the Ephesian elders plenty about, is that gospel ministry will always provoke conflict and opposition.

See in verses 1 to 3 as the chapter starts, Paul talks about a Gentile riot and a Jewish plot. In fact, he talks about that a lot.

[8 : 54] Opposition from without and opposition from within. And I think that's the first feature of Paul's ministry that Luke is showing us. It's actually a feature of all faithful gospel ministry.

It always has been. Which of your fathers did they not, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? Remember Stephen asking his opponents. Gospel proclamation always provokes conflict and opposition.

We've already talked about the Ephesian riot in the previous chapter, and having just scraped through that in verse 3, we learn about a Jewish plot. We don't know much about this particular plot, but we do know that this kind of thing was happening to Paul all the time.

Gentile opposition on the one hand, Jewish opposition on the other. And obviously, the plot was so genuinely threatening in one way or another that it interrupted ministry. It forced Paul to change his plans.

Secondly, notice the repetition of the word encouragement in verses 1 and 2. Paul went around encouraging the disciples, which of course is, it isn't just about making them feel better, though that's part of it, but it's about instilling courage in them.

[10 : 05] People need to be strengthened. Disciples need to be emboldened, especially in the context of opposition. A third feature of Paul's ministry is also here in verses 1 and 2, although unfortunately the ESV slightly obscures it.

If you're looking in another translation, it might do better. But literally in verse 2, Luke writes, when he had gone through those regions, encouraging them with much word, he came to Greece.

How did Paul encourage them? With much word. Or with much speech, we might say. So you can see why that might sound a bit clunky to translate into English, but I think the ESV just hasn't quite captured this important element.

The NIV does a little bit better. He traveled through that area speaking many words of encouragement to the people. But literally, if you just want a really wooden translation, it's almost impossible to understand, Luke says that Paul encouraged them with much word.

With much word. Now I think that's important because it highlights something essential to Christian ministry. It's about proclamation. How does Christian encouragement work?

[11 : 19] We have to use much word. It's about articulation, proclamation, communication, preaching. And again, in next week's passage as Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders, he piles up a number of proclamation words.

He talks about preaching and teaching, verse 20, declaring, verse 21, testifying to the good news of God's grace, verse 24, preaching the kingdom, verse 25, and proclaiming the whole will of God, verse 27.

And in other words, what was his ministry about and what is all good gospel ministry about? Much word. The gospel is a word. So it requires much word to declare and explain.

Again, if you want to be a great encouragement to our church, perhaps even this morning, you know, over our Thanksgiving lunch, if we want to strengthen and embolden each other, what we need to focus on is much word, talking to each other, listening, of course, we don't all have to talk at once, but making sure we talk about things that matter.

Not just talking about frivolous things, but talking about gospel things, talking about the good news of God's grace, talking about the kingdom, talking about the will of God, warning each other about false teaching and false teachers, all things that I'm sure Roy will pick up on next week.

[12 : 43] But for now, just notice, that's what Paul did. He engaged in a gospel ministry. He provoked opposition. He encouraged the disciples by preaching much word. Now, the fourth feature of Paul's ministry was that he didn't work alone.

He recruited a godly team of co-workers. You see the list that begins in verse 4. Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him. And of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus and Gaius of Derbe and Timothy and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus.

These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas. I think this list highlights a couple of things. First, it highlights the fact that Paul was in the business of recruiting and training co-workers.

Particularly, of course, Timothy was a standout in this regard. But a bunch of these men are also mentioned elsewhere. Tychicus is described elsewhere as a dear brother, a faithful servant, and fellow worker in the Lord.

Aristarchus was Paul's fellow prisoner when he wrote Colossians. He's also called a fellow worker in Paul's letter to Philemon. In other words, Paul's ministry involved evangelism.

[13 : 50] Sure, he wanted to see people converted, but he also recruited and trained co-workers to make sure that his ministry multiplied and endured down the generations.

We are a church committed to this, aren't we? And we need to keep doing it. The second thing this list, though, shows is Paul's integrity. And that might not be obvious immediately, but once you sort of start doing some cross-referencing and comparing Acts 20 to some of Paul's letters, it becomes obvious that that's what these men were about.

There was another reason why Paul had this entourage. Not just a kind of list of fellow missionaries and assistants, but this entourage is made up of men from different towns.

And in 1 Corinthians chapter 16, verse 1, Paul writes, I think I've got it for you. Now, concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia so you also are to do, on the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up as he may prosper so that there will be no collecting when I come.

And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

[15 : 10] In other words, you see, as Paul travels around the Mediterranean making disciples and encouraging them, he's also collecting money to take back to the church in Jerusalem to help them in their poverty.

But he wants to make sure that it's all done in an above board and transparent kind of a way. So he asks each of the churches to appoint someone, a trustworthy man with a letter of accreditation, to go with Paul to carry the gift.

So there was Sopita from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, etc. In other words, this list represents not just a group of co-workers, missionaries and missionaries and training and so on, but also it represents the loving fellowship between the churches each of these men represent.

I'm so glad we prayed for the FIEC this morning because here's a kind of little Pauline denomination. Forming, isn't there? A network of churches spanning Jews and Gentiles who love each other and want to share with each other as they have opportunity.

We'll come back to that at the end. But as we move into verse 7 we come to the fifth feature of Paul's ministry which is of course that at times he performed extraordinary miracles. This is a rather strange one though, isn't it?

[16 : 35] Why does Luke record it for us? I mean it is wonderful but what are we to take away from it? Is it just a great moral lesson about the dangers of falling asleep in church? Well perhaps.

Be warned. We're about 5% of the way through. No, I'm kidding. But I think there is more to it. Of course again we see Paul using much word don't we?

And if you want a snapshot of Paul's ministry in action here's one. Paul prolonged his speech late into the night. Remember of course it wouldn't have been a day off for any of them.

So after they have worked they go straight to church evening service. They're probably exhausted before church has even started.

But they're eager to listen to Paul and he is eager to speak. not just because he liked the sound of his own voice but because he had so many important things to say, right?

[17 : 37] And even after midnight and Eutychus' catastrophic snooze Paul continued to speak until daylight. That's how important he thought speaking was.

Explaining things, teaching things, answering questions because that's how Christian encouragement happens. And again I think the ESV is just slightly unhelpful here.

Just because the word comforted there at the end of verse 12 is exactly the same word we saw earlier which was translated encourage. I just think it's helpful to make that connection. In other words see Luke told us something general about Paul's ministry in verses 1-6.

Now he's trying to show us a specific example of it where Paul used much word to encourage the disciples. And of course the other source of great encouragement was the miraculous raising of Eutychus from the dead.

Verse 12 is such an understatement isn't it? They were not a little comforted or they were not a little encouraged. Yeah they had just seen one of their members rise from the dead picked up off the floor.

[18 : 50] And I think the point here is to align Paul with Elijah and Elisha Jesus and Peter who all performed similar miracles. So in 1 Kings chapter 17 Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath and a Gentile woman.

In 2 Kings chapter 4 Elisha raises the son of a Shunammite woman who was probably presumably Jewish because Shunamm was occupied by Israelites at the time. In Luke chapter 7 Jesus raises the son of a widow of Nain.

And in Acts chapter 9 Peter raises Tabitha to life. Now we can't go through all of these occasions of course but I think 1 Kings chapter 17 the first one is probably the most important one anyway just because it kind of sets up our expectations and guides our reading for the rest of them.

And it is very similar to what we read about here in Acts chapter 20. It happens in an upper room. Elijah stretched out his body upon the child and as the narrator puts that the life of the child came into him again and he revived.

And at the end of that episode the woman said to Elijah now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

[20 : 07] In other words I think that's what we're supposed to see here is that the same words could be applied to Paul. Paul was a man of God and the word of the Lord in his mouth was truth.

The other thing about Elijah that I think is worth remembering just in the context of that miracle that he did is that at the time Elijah was being accused of being a great troubler of Israel because he was bringing, apparently he was bringing death upon the land.

He prayed for the rain to cease and for famine to strike the land and it did for three years and this really infuriated the king of Israel at the time Ahab. So that on one occasion when Ahab saw Elijah Ahab said to him is it you you troubler of Israel?

And he answered I have not troubled Israel but you have and your father's house because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. And you might remember the rest I suppose they have a great showdown on Mount Carmel between the prophets of Baal and little Elijah and Yahweh shows that he is the only true and living God.

But you see the point there is this showdown between Ahab and Elijah the question is who is the troubler of Israel? Ahab or Elijah?

[21 : 29] Who is bringing death upon the land? Ahab or Elijah? And who is bringing life? And so another part of the point of Elijah's miracle is to prove that he is actually the one bringing life.

Trust in the Lord brings life. It's Ahab's refusal to worship Yahweh that is bringing judgment and death upon the land. And I take it again that we're supposed to see the parallels with Paul.

Was Paul a troublemaker? How can he defend himself in light of the swirling chaos all around him? Luke wants us to know Paul was a man of God who spoke the word of the Lord, who preached the truth, and far from bringing trouble or death, wherever he went.

Paul brought life to those who would listen to him. Sin brings death. Gospel preaching brings life and peace and joy and encouragement to those who will hear it.

Which brings us to feature number six. Paul's ministry was international and expansive. We haven't talked about the geography of this section yet, but of course Luke lists a heap of names and places.

[22 : 41] Paul starts off in Ephesus, he traveled up the coast of Turkey towards Troas at the top there, over the sea to Philippi, down through Macedonia passing Thessalonica and Berea, etc., all the way down to Corinth in Achaia, before returning, as he says, because of the Jewish plot, going back the way he came instead of sailing directly across to Syria.

He raised Eutychus to life on his way back through Troas, walked overland to Assos, according to verse 13, and then sailed down the coast through some of the islands, Chios and Samos.

But in other words, it represents a huge swathe of land, of course, hundreds of thousands of people, even millions of people, and I would take that dotted line actually just with a pinch of salt too.

As I've said before, we don't know the exact path he walked, or whether we're being told all the details. And in his letter to the Romans, which he probably wrote from Corinth during the visit we've just been talking about, Paul mentions that he preached the gospel from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, which is actually even further northwest than this map goes, right?

Up into Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, not quite Austria, but, you know, places like that. So Paul might have taken a rather large detour off this route that we just don't have the details about.

[24 : 01] The point is that his ministry was international and expansive. He wanted to get the gospel out there, a missionary without borders. This has always been the character of the Christian faith, ever since the Great Commission.

In the Old Testament, Israel was to be a light on a hill, attracting the nations, if you like, by her wise and righteous way of life. But in the New Testament, the dynamic changes quite significantly.

The Lord Jesus commissions his people to go over the hills and far away to gather his lost sheep, or is that his ducklings, wherever they are. Paul's expansive vision for international mission is no less relevant today than it was in the first century.

Which brings us to the final feature of Paul's ministry, which is that even though it is clearly a progression from the Old Testament, Paul is not living like a Jew anymore, there is no mistaking that it was still rooted in the Old Testament, and Paul values his heritage.

He was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. This is really important for defending Paul's ministry.

[25 : 15] He's saying, I haven't kind of started a new religion, I'm just fulfilling what the prophets and the fathers always taught and always believed. Paul's haste, I presume, relates to the gift that he was carrying for the Jewish Christians.

He wants to be back to celebrate Pentecost with them, that day when traditionally Israelites would celebrate the bringing in of the barley harvest. But of course, for Christians, this day is even more significant now, because it's the day when the Spirit was poured out, the beginning of the new age of abundance, and the bringing in of all the nations.

Listen to how Paul describes his plans to the Romans, again writing this letter probably from Corinth during his stay there. Paul writes in Romans chapter 15, At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they are also to be of service to them in material blessings.

See, Paul has this rule that particularly applies to the Jew-Gentile relationship. Far from a wall of dividing hostility, a wall of hostility now dividing Jews and Gentiles, God has worked through Paul to bring Jew and Gentile together.

[26 : 40] Paul wants the Jewish and Gentile churches to recognize their interdependence on one another, to show their love for one another through mutual blessing, sharing what they have, and appreciating what each other can offer.

All right, so there you have it. We began with the question, can the gospel be defended? And can Paul's ministry be defended? Luke has laid out for us seven features of Paul's ministry.

Now it's up to us to decide. And in a day and age when so many people are asking questions about the goodness of the gospel, and the goodness of those who love the gospel and preach the gospel, we must ask ourselves whether we are committed to Paul and the kind of gospel ministry he engaged in.

He provoked opposition. Yes, the gospel proclamation always provokes opposition. He encouraged the disciples. He preached much word.

He recruited a godly team of co-workers. He worked mighty miracles to show the life-giving power of the gospel. He had an international and expansive vision for the gospel paired with a love for his Jewish roots for the saints who had shared their spiritual blessings with the world.

[27 : 56] Let's pray. Loving Father, we thank you for our apostle, whom the Lord Jesus commissioned to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

We thank you that the gospel has made it all the way here to the other side of the world. And we thank you that Paul did act with courage, with integrity.

We pray, Father, that you would help us to do the same, to be faithful in our proclamation of the gospel, faithful in our ministry to one another as we both listen to his words and share with each other and speak to each other.

Even today, you might encourage us and build us up so we might be more faithful to our Lord Jesus and his mission. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.