



“DIFFERENT RECEPTIONS”
(FURTHER Sermon Series) | Acts 17:1-15
by Pastor Timmy Fearer
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There is a spiritual logic to the way we order our services. In a lot of churches, it's just a different style. You have singing and everything right up front, and they save the sermon for last. Sometimes that's called the Frontier Style, where you have the message as the main thing, the crescendo of the service. And then everybody walks for an altar call. That's not a bad thing; that's a good thing.

In our spiritual world, the choir begins our service with an acclamation of praise, focusing on the glory of God. Then there's a call to the congregation to stand, if you're able, and do our part—belt it out, the glory of God, all the beauty and the goodness.

It gets to a point where you are focusing on the glory of God, and you realize just how naked and messed up you are, and you're not ready to hear the Gospel. So we have a time to give whatever it is we need to give to God, just clear the air, like in a marriage: "How are we doing?" "Well, I'm sorry for this." "Yeah, let's just get that right."

Then we sing some more, and then we're ready to hear the Scripture. The communication lines are cleared out. We're ready to hear the message, which is in the middle of the service, not at the end.

Then everything that follows the message is a response to the message, whether it's praying for people, whether it's taking the Supper, whether it's baptizing people, or whether it's commissioning people for ministry. I've even performed a marriage after the sermon as an act of discipleship, as a response to the Gospel. Marriage is part of your discipleship, right? Everything is. So everything that follows the message is a response to the Gospel.

Then we have some announcements, and we have some food. That's our style, our rhythm, and our logic—why we order things the way that we do.

We are in week three of our latest series in the book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles. In this series, we're tracing the second of three so-called missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul and his team. On this second trip, they're making their way west (to the left).



You see the second journey of Paul. They get their start in their home church, Syrian Antioch. Remember, there are other cities named Antioch in the ancient world.

This is where Paul, Silas, and Barnabas had their ministry. This is where Christians were first called Christians, in the first-century Church of Antioch, and they become the great missionary-sending

church in the beginning of Christianity. So you can trace the line as they head west from Antioch. They make their way through what we know today as Turkey, and then further west across the Aegean Sea, over to Greece, which is the green portion. They're moving from city to city. They're in Thessalonica and Berea in today's story, and then—this is forthcoming in the coming weeks—by ship, they go back over to Turkey to Ephesus, a big city on the west coast of what we know as Turkey. Then again, they travel by ship to Israel, and then walk their way north, back up to Syria and Antioch. This probably took about three months for them to finish this trip, a little over 3,000 miles, half of that on foot—1,500 miles walking—which was made easier by the Roman road system. A lot of those roads are still around. Some of you have walked on them. It's hard for us to imagine in our car and airplane culture: "How could you walk 1,500 miles in three months?" Well, that was normal.

Initially, Paul and his team were visiting evangelized people in churches they had established on the first journey. But now, they're breaking ground in their second journey by heading over to Greece. It was there we spent part of week one and all of last week, week two—in the city of Philippi.

Today, the team is moving on. It is the year 49 or 50 AD, about 16-17 years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension into the heavenly places, which is where the book of Acts began. We've been in Acts for about six months now. So, let's dive back into where they are in their journey. We're walking along with them.

Let's ask a question about the story this morning: How is it that some people wind up believing the

message about Jesus and others don't? What's the difference? How is it that some wind up believing while others—they hear the same thing, they may be sitting under the same preacher, or messenger, or at the same coffee table as somebody sharing—and they don't believe it. So that's our question. Let's get into the story.

Acts 17:1

¹ After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

Thessalonica was a city of about 45-60,000 people 2,000 years ago. Now, it's a city of a million people in modern Greece, about 100 miles south of Philippi. Remember, there was no synagogue in Philippi because there were not enough men. You had to have 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue. Remember the anti-Semitism last week in the story? Maybe that's why there was no synagogue in Philippi. There is a synagogue in Thessalonica.

What would you find in a synagogue in the Mediterranean world 2,000 years ago? You'd find ethnic Jews who were part of the diaspora—the big dispersion of Jews around the world that started 600 years before Jesus, when the Babylonians came in, leveled Jerusalem, and carried off so many of the people who lived there. So, you'd find ethnic Jews who are now at home in Greece. You'd also find what are called proselytes. Proselytize—that's when you try to convince somebody to come your way, maybe to accept your religion. So, proselytes would be Gentiles, Greeks in this case, and other ethnicities who had become practicing Jews. And if they were adult males, they would have submitted themselves to circumcision. Then you'd also find

people who are referred to as God-fearers. These would be Gentiles who are following the 10 Commandments and other aspects of Jewish lifestyle, but they hadn't become full-blown Jews. You'd also find the curious, those who are exploring, people who are sympathetic. So, you would find four groups. The story continues.

Acts 17:2

²*And Paul went in [to the synagogue], as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, ...*

When it says Scriptures, it's referring to the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. They didn't have a New Testament. It didn't exist yet. A Greek translation of the Old Testament was the Bible of the early church.

Acts 17:3

³*...explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you."*

Suffering would include not just suffering, but also death. This is what Paul was saying in any synagogue he went into:

1. There's a basis for believing in a suffering and dying Messiah in the Old Testament Scriptures.
2. There's a basis for a rising-from-the-dead Messiah.
3. Our own eyewitness accounts, our own experience with Jesus of Nazareth, suffering, dying, rising: He is the Messiah.

Now, all three things would be shocking to a Jewish ear 2,000 years ago, and it's remained the

case to this very day, for practicing Jews, a stumbling block, as Paul describes in his first chapter to his first letter to the Corinthian Christians. We're going to meet them in a couple of weeks.

This suffering and dying servant of God as a profile of the Messiah is like a minority report. It's a bit of a whisper in the Old Testament that's easily drowned out by the shout of this image of a Messiah King—a David or Solomon 2.0—a powerful person riding in on a white horse and wiping out all the enemies of God. We would agree with Paul that that's coming one day—this Messiah King in glory and power—but not before the suffering servant Messiah, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. The same person, but the first ministry is the ministry we read about in the New Testament. This is unexpected, and it's not immediately clear from the Old Testament. It has to be made clear, and it takes somebody to make it clear.

We see Jesus himself doing this in Luke 24. Some of you know the story of the very first Easter Sunday. That evening, there are two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus outside Jerusalem. They're dejected. They're confused. Their leader has been arrested just in the days previous. He's been abused. He's been crucified, dead and buried. Some women are saying, "Hey, the tomb was empty this morning." These two disciples don't know what's going on as they walk together, and Jesus comes up behind them in the story. They don't recognize him, and he says, "What are you guys talking about?" They tell him. Then Jesus began to explain to them that the Messiah had to suffer—that's the language—and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, interpreting to

them the Scriptures. These two guys do come to believe at the end of the story.

This is what Paul is doing in the synagogue. He's doing the same thing. It's a lot of effort over three successive weekends, a lot of conversations, a lot of back and forth, reasoning, arguing. Who responds to this? Let's keep reading.

Acts 17:4

⁴ Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

Some of the Jews have this heart and mind shift. So did a great many of the proselytes and the God-fearers. Then it says something interesting: among the devout Greeks, a good number of leading women from the town who were in the synagogue for whatever reason were persuaded—society women, connected women, business women like Lydia in Philippi, political women married to leading men, women, whoever they were. This is a mark of early Christianity—breaking through, breaking down all the barriers, anybody and everybody collected together, reaching people you would never expect. Also, not reaching people whom you would expect, like faithful, practicing Jews who are waiting for their Messiah. They don't recognize him, even when the case is made to them. How does that happen, that some believe and some don't?

Acts 17:5a

^{5a} But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.

Jealousy comes from the Jewish leaders of the synagogue and the Jewish community leaders who are suddenly losing members and friends. We saw this in Paul's first journey a lot, didn't we? They can't win the argument, so they start a riot. It sounds like our own country on the nightly news. You don't win the argument, so you start burning things down.

Acts 17:5b

^{5b} While they [the mob] were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly [the public marketplace for a mock trial], they attacked Jason's house.

Now, who is Jason? It could be the same Jason that's mentioned at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 16. He's got a whole list of friends there. Jason is a Jew who has become a Christian and is a colleague. We don't know if it's the same Jason. Regardless, this Jason had committed the terrible sin of extending hospitality to strangers, to Paul and company. So it continues.

Acts 17:6-7

⁶ When they could not find them [Paul and Silas], they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus."

So, word has spread about the ministry of Paul and company in previous cities, like up in Philippi. The mob claims that the team came to do the same in Thessalonica, and Jason has entertained them as guests. Most seriously, they are all acting contrary

to the decrees of the Roman Caesar, Tiberius, saying that there is another king named Jesus. Wow. You can't have two kings, can you?

Indeed, in a sense, that's what Paul and company were saying, not only that Jesus suffered, died, and rose again, but also that Jesus is Lord and Savior. The early Christians were not the first ones to call somebody Lord and Savior. The Romans before them, in the emperor worship cult, had already started to call Caesar Lord and Savior, not to mention Son of God. So it's provocative. You can't have two saviors. You can't have two Lords.

Back to our question: What is it that moves people to a point of belief, and what is it that keeps others from believing? I think one barrier is for a person to say, "I don't need to be saved from anything. I'm fine." Or, "I don't need a Lord. I'm my own Lord."

I remember talking to a woman years ago who said, "Virginia doesn't follow anybody. Virginia follows herself." Really, that's where all of us are in our natural state, apart from a work of the Holy Spirit.

Let's keep going. The religious leaders don't really care about any challenge to the Emperor cult, because, as Jews, they already enjoyed a delicate agreement with the Roman authorities. They had permission to disagree with the idea that Caesar was divine, or becoming divine—Son of God, Lord and Savior. The Roman authorities, because there were so many Jews throughout the empire, wanted to keep them happy. As long as the Jews behave, pay their taxes, stay in their space, then everything is okay. So, they don't care about that, but they're going to use this accusation against the Christians to get the Christians out of the picture.

Back to who is the actual Savior and Lord. Is it Jesus, or is it somebody else, an earthly figure, a political figure? Is the Gospel, is Christianity political? It is if somebody demands your ultimate and total allegiance to something or someone else, other than the person of Jesus. For example, when a government or some earthly authority is overstepping its limited bounds, asking or telling you to do things that are contrary to what Jesus wants you to do, then it becomes a political thing. We saw this in Acts 5. Let me remind you of the story. The apostles are healing people right and left in the temple precincts. They're arrested by jealous leaders. But then it says an angel of the Lord in the middle of the night opens the prison and commands the apostles to make an exit, get back to the temple, and pick up where they left off. So, they do that the very next morning. The jealous religious leaders are stunned to find the prison empty and the apostles back at it. They call them in again, and they say:

Acts 5:28

²⁸ We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name.

They don't even want to say the name of Jesus. Peter and the apostles respond with this.

Acts 5:29

²⁹ We must obey God rather than any human authority.

In other words, if you're forcing us to choose between you and God, we're going to choose God. That's a political statement because it's all about power. What is politics? Politics is about earthly power, period. How a society, how a community, how a family, organizes itself and distributes

power. We were saying in our chapel service earlier—for our people, ministering to our children during this hour—even in a marriage, there is politics. I remember one therapist saying, "In a marriage, there's always a maximizer and a minimizer." In your marriage, who's the maximizer and who's the minimizer, and who decided that? That's a decision about how you're going to arrange power and decision-making in a relationship. So, that's politics. There's that saying, "Everything is politics." Power is always a factor in every relationship, every interaction. "Everything is politics," but then the saying concludes with "but politics is not everything."

That's where the Gospel comes in. Life and the meaning of life cannot be reduced to, "Well, everything is just about power and the struggle for power." No, that's Marxism, to reduce everything down to some struggle for power. That's critical theory and we don't buy that. There's more to life. There's more going on in relationships. Back to the accusations of the mob.

Acts 17:7-8

⁷ . . . They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus."⁸ The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this,

Of course, they were, just like on Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he was hailed as King David 2.0. The Jewish authorities see that their power is in jeopardy. If the Romans see this, the Romans might say, "Hey, there's an insurrection starting. We're going to send in the legions and just wipe the place clean," which they did in 70 AD. Ultimately, city officials in Thessalonica are frightened. They're fearing that

the same thing could happen. Then the whole thing just blows over. Look at this next line:

Acts 17:9

⁹ and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go.

We don't know how that happened, but they calmed everything down. "Let's just make this thing go away." Somehow, it blew over. But the new believers know this could come up again. They know the rabble, they know the ruffians, they know the leaders, they know their town.

Acts 17:10

¹⁰ That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

Berea is the town down the road, further along towards Athens.

Acts 17:11

¹¹ These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so.

When Paul and company arrive, they went to the Jewish synagogue, like they always do. Now we get a bit of an explanation to the question: How is it that some people believe and others don't? Here's what it says: "for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so." These are the things this line refers to: Is there evidence for a suffering and a dying Messiah? Is there evidence in the Scriptures for a rising Messiah? Do Paul's and company's accounts of Jesus line up with this

suffering, dying, rising Messiah? Thus, Jesus is Messiah. The Bereans are open. They get into the Scriptures themselves, and the result is:

Acts 17:12

¹² Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.

The same thing is happening here as happened in Thessalonica—yet seemingly a greater number—but in both places, we really haven't gotten the answer yet that we want. What is it that happens on the inside of these people who come to believe, that convinces them, and convinces so many of us in this room? The Bereans get into the Scriptures. They are open. They wrestle with things. They examine. They use their heads. They reason it out. That's all good, but there is more to the picture—really two things. And the thing about these two things is that both of these things are totally out of our control.

The first thing is the spiritual power of the message about the cross and the resurrection. There is power in that message. I want to say to you, church, trust the message. Trust the simple story. You don't have to dress it up. It does not need slick packaging, or some kind of clever rebranding, or makeover. It just needs to be shared. There is power in the message of the cross. Jesus lived. Jesus died on a cross for you. Jesus lives again. Tell that story. That's the first thing.

The second thing—you need the second thing because a lot of people hear the story, but they still don't believe—this clinches it: coupled with the power of the message of the cross, is what we would call the inner working, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. God is living. He is active. He's busy

right now, in people's hearts and minds, working this inner witness of the Holy Spirit, softening people up, opening people up, convincing people, convincing you of something new. The power of this message and that inner working, that inner witness of the Holy Spirit, that's when the message becomes irresistible, and it's all out of our control.

Jesus actually tells a short parable about this at one point in his ministry. Sometimes it's called the Parable of the Growing Seed. So, we're going to wrap up the message with that parable, and then with a true story that is happening right now and every Sunday.

Mark 4:26-29

²⁶ [Jesus] also said, "The kingdom of God [what Paul and company are spreading] is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, and he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come."

That's what a farmer does in this part of the world at this time: no irrigation necessarily. Some places did have irrigation, but the farmer scatters the seed, lays down his tools. He's done what he can. Then he repeatedly checks on it, but is not in control of it—watching, waiting, maybe praying for some rain. Then the seed would sprout and grow. This is incredible. How does that happen? It looks different than the seed that was scattered. How does that become this? It says the farmer does not know how. It's a mystery how it happens. Jesus keeps working the analogy describing how the earth produces the stalk, then the head, then the full grain. We don't

control any of that. When the grain is ripe, here's where we come in: "at once he [the farmer] goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come." That's what Paul and company are doing. They are scattering the seed. They're waiting to see what happens, and then they're reaping a harvest.

How the message germinates in a person's heart and mind and grows into faith and belief is a mystery. It's a work of God. That's some good news here: the pressure is off. You don't need to make it happen. You just need to sow the seed and be ready to reap the harvest. There are a lot of churches that try to make it happen. That's manipulation. That's pressure. That's technique. We're not about that here.

So, let me tell you this story. We have a sister church in what we could be described as the Rust Belt. We have about 400-plus congregations around the country, and this sister church of ours is set along the Ohio River in what was the industrial heartland. But due to political decisions, policy decisions of over 30 years ago, a lot of what people found their bread and butter in moved to Mexico and other places where the labor was cheaper. These towns got hollowed out. They're dying and the churches often are dying. This church of ours has been dying.

Its claim to fame: it was part of the Underground Railroad during the Civil War, a way station for escaping slaves to head north. But two years ago, there were just about 40 people in this church looking for a pastor. Nobody wanted to go there. They even had money to pay. Nobody wanted to go there.

In another one of our churches in the northwest, there was a couple with five kids. They had been trained as commissioned lay pastors. (We have eight commissioned lay pastors in this church.) This couple had some extra training that allowed them to be authorized to plant a church, to start a church. They were looking around for opportunities. They were looking into maybe a mission overseas. Nothing was opening up. They hear about this church along the Ohio River, and they pray about it, and they interview, and they're accepted to become the new pastor and spouse with their five kids. They move halfway across the country, and they get to work.

For the next, year or so, the congregation continues to diminish. By the way, this new pastoral couple, they're heavily tattooed. For those of you who don't know what that means, they have a lot of tattoos. And the wife was described to me as having a lot of metal setting off the buzzers going through security—a lot of piercings. They are not what some people would imagine the new pastor and his wife. But all this time, as they're loving these faithful folks who are elderly and the congregation's dying off, they're going into the town and they're getting to know the people, and a lot of them look like them. They're meeting them in the grocery store. They're inviting them to coffee. They're inviting them over to their home for a meal. They're meeting them at the playground, at the softball or little league field with their kids, getting to know each other.

Nine months ago, on a Sunday morning, after the congregation had whittled down to just single digits, 40 people show up all on the same day, and they are all people that this couple has been getting to know. The pastor and his wife are

stunned and they talk to them before and after the service. "How was it that you decided to come this morning?" The people had not spoken to each other and, to a person, their answers were, "I don't know. I just felt like I needed to come to church this morning," or "I just felt like I needed to visit your church." So, they all show up on the same day, and for the last nine months, that church has had 40 to 60 people in worship every Sunday, and they're in the process of baptizing 20 of them.

People wind up believing, and we're not in control of it. Don't try to control it. Leave that up to the Holy Spirit.

We are in control of this: share the message. Trust the power of the message. Trust this inner working of the Holy Spirit, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, and then watch God work. That's actually part of our own story. Some of you have no idea what brought you here, but we do: the Holy Spirit. And we're glad that you're here. Keep coming.

Epilogue: end of the story.

Acts 17:13-15

¹³ But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. ¹⁵ Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

Athens—that's going to get interesting, but you have to come back next week to find out what happens. Let me pray for us.

Thank you, Father, that you sent the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit to do something so unusual, so unexpected, so effective: to live a life of complete surrender to you, Father, and to die a death in complete surrender to you, and to be raised in power on the third day in complete surrender to you, and then blessing and empowering and restoring and transforming the lives of us to live in complete surrender to you. It's the only thing that's going to change this world. The power of the love of God. Make that go deeper, firmly rooted, all-pervasive in this family that we call First Prez, but also in our community and on this island and beyond. For those who are feeling, "I am finding myself wanting to take another step. I find myself believing part of this, all of this," Lord, help them to continue to step forward into Your embrace. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.