

Acts 17:1-8

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[0:00] Would you open up Acts chapter 17 on page 926 in the Bible so you can see what we're going to be learning from this morning. And if you're a child, I hope you've got a sheet. If you haven't got a sheet, then somebody can bring you one if you put your hand up. Has every child got a sheet? And there are two parts to the sheet. There's the under eights and then there's the nine and above bit. So do follow along on that and hopefully it will make sense by itself.

It's Sunday today, but on Sunday March the 30th, 1851, around 40% of the population of England was in church. 40%. By the year 2005, that figure had fallen to 6.3%. And if you go out onto the streets and ask them today, are you religious? Then more than half of the population of this country will tell you that they are not. Just looking at the statistics, you can see that the church has declined significantly in its size and its impact in British society.

And we feel that and we see it in different ways, don't we? We see it, for example, in the legislation that's passed by the government, which is increasingly legislation passed in denial of the teaching of scripture. We see it in the advocacy of the new atheists who are campaigning against religion.

We see it in attempts to get street preachers off the streets in complaints about having the Christian message taught, even in a very mild way, in primary schools and that kind of thing. Britain has changed since 1851 quite dramatically. We are nowhere near the state of a country like Pakistan and Christians in this country still enjoy remarkable liberties and freedom and peacefulness. So we shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking that our situation is anything like the situation of Christians in difficult countries like that, or in Syria, for example, and many other places that we could name. But nonetheless, and I suspect this is particularly true of an older generation, we can feel that the world has changed around us quite dramatically and in unsettling ways.

I suspect, I wasn't alive in the 1950s as you can tell, but I suspect if you were, you felt reasonably comfortable as a Christian in what was in some senses a Christian country, in that it had some kind of adherence still then, at least to Christian morality, if not to the claims of the Christian gospel. So if you knew that age, now feels very, very different indeed. And all the changes that have taken place in our country raise all sorts of difficult questions for the church, don't they?

How should the church respond to a changed nation? And how should the church reach a changed nation with the gospel? So from outside, we have questions pressing upon us, we have pressure upon us.

[3:28] But we also have internal challenges in the life of any church, don't we? And I don't know, I've obviously preached here before and I did your church weekend, but I don't know your church life very well, but I imagine there are all sorts of internal pressures in the life of your church as well.

For example, the evident growth in the church creates issues and challenges for a church. The building project which you're attempting to embark on creates issues and challenges for the church. There will be things within the life of the church which raise questions for you. So both given the external pressures of our culture and the inevitable internal challenges in the life of a church, you may well find yourself sometimes wondering, what sort of church should we be?

And that's the question I want to think about with you this morning from Acts 17. What sort of church should IPC Ealing be? And what should its priorities be?

Given all of the external pressures and challenges and the internal challenges developments as well. What sort of church should you be?

[4:38] It seems to me that there are two common responses to the kinds of challenges that I've outlined. And you might characterize them like this. The first would be the circle the wagons approach.

That we are surrounded by an increasingly challenging and, to be honest, frightening culture. We wonder what the future holds. And the temptation really, you know what they did in the westerns, if they're riding along in the westerns and they see the enemy coming over the brow of the hill, what do they do?

They get the wagons going in a circle because it's a good defensive position. And you stay inside the circle of wagons to protect yourself. This is the sort of museum approach to church.

That the answer to a changing, frightening culture is to freeze everything in the life of the church, perhaps in the 1950s. So that you never sing anything that was written before, who knows when, whatever your favourite date is.

1940 perhaps. 1900 perhaps. It's the old for old sake approach. It's what we might call, children, sheets, the antiquarian approach to the life of the church.

[5:44] Okay? Preserve it. Pickle it, if you like. Just keep it all the same. And there are plenty of churches that have taken that approach to a scary, changing world.

Freeze everything. Touch nothing. Change nothing. That would be one approach. But the second approach, actually precisely the opposite, would be the change everything approach.

And here, there are many churches that would want to change, first of all, even the message of the church. Bishop Spong was a famous Episcopal bishop in America.

The Anglican church in America. And he wrote a book, the argument of which was that Christianity must change or die. That if you keep on teaching the same message, the church will shrivel up and die.

You must embrace instead a kind of vague, general spirituality, which will be amenable to the people of a changing world around you, that they too can embrace.

[6:48] There are other forms of this, aren't there? I think some of the preaching you see, if you watch it on satellite TV, is that what you see? Is it still called satellite TV? Is it satellite? Is that the right word? It feels slightly old-fashioned as I say it.

But anyway, whatever that thing is now, with all those channels. That kind of preaching you see there, churches, stadiums full of thousands of people. Has anyone ever seen Joel Osteen on TV? Joel Osteen, who's into the I am sayings. You know the I am sayings? Not the I am sayings of John's Gospel. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

I am the resurrection and the life. But rather the I am sayings of self-affirmation. So he gets them all standing up, and I'm not going to do it, don't worry. But he gets them all standing up, thousands of people chanting, I am intelligent.

I am beautiful. I am strong. I am successful. I am confident. Change the message to one of vague spirituality with Bishop Spong.

[7:42] To one of self-affirmation with Joel Osteen. Change the preaching to be full of stories and comedy. There are even preachers who study comedians to work out how they should preach.

Change the method as well. And here, in the change everything thing, you don't sing anything from before 1990, probably. You only sing new things, and you change your church to resemble something more like a rock concert.

Again, something that will make people feel at home, given where our culture is at. And you get the impression from this kind of approach that the church has only just been invented. And that there were no Christians before 1990 writing songs.

So you change the message and the method. And this kind of church, you might call it the trendy church, as opposed to the antiquarian church, ends up resembling a peculiar mix of therapy and a gig.

Put the two together. And you get sort of self-help teaching plus rock music. And you end up with a kind of therapy gig church. Trendy church. Now what sort of church should IPC Ealing be?

[8:49] Should it become the antiquarian church? Should it be the trendy church? Well, let's look at what the Apostle Paul shows us in Acts 17.

Here we find Paul on his second missionary journey.

His second missionary journey. The year is 49 or 50 AD. He is pioneering. He is heading into Greece in response to that call from the Macedonian man that has come earlier in Acts.

And all of this is very much the outworking of what the Lord Jesus said at the beginning of the book of Acts. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria. And to the end of the earth. Acts 1 verse 8. To the end of the earth.

And here we are at the end of the earth. With the gospel going out even to these Greeks in Macedonia. Thessalonica, where they are now, is an incredibly Roman place.

[9:55] It's really, really into being Roman. And that will become important as we look more closely at the passage. It is, in other words, very hostile territory.

Sometimes we draw inspiration, don't we, as Christians. If you know some Christian history from the giants of the past. Maybe you are into the giants of the Reformation in the 16th century. The giants of the revivals of the 18th century.

But actually, their culture was not that like our culture. They were living in some kind of Christendom. Where there was a pretty much universal acceptance, at least in theory, of the truths of the Christian faith.

If not in practice in individuals' lives. Our situation is much more like this situation here in Acts 17, isn't it? Bringing the gospel into a culture which is really very largely ignorant of the gospel.

And hostile to the gospel. And worships other gods. That's what Thessalonica was like. And that's what our situation today is like. So here we see Paul going into this new territory.

[10:57] Starting a church. And we can ask, well what's his message? And what's his method? What does he teach? And how does he do it?

And we can learn from him some priorities for the church today. And it's pretty straightforward, really. The message, first of all. Have a look at verse 2. Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures.

So his message, quite simply, is the message of the Bible. But it's more specific than that. Because as we read on, we get some more detail. Verse 3. Explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.

So within scripture there is a particular focus on the promised Messiah. On the Christ. Now that doesn't mean, of course, that Paul is only preaching what ends up being the Gospels.

The stories of Jesus' life. Because how much of the Bible focuses on the Messiah? All of it does. Back from Genesis 3.15 we have the promise of the serpent crusher.

[12:09] We have all of the types of Christ in the Old Testament and the kings and the priests and the prophets. The whole of the Bible is pointing to the Christ, to the Messiah.

And specifically to his death and his resurrection. So Paul's message is the message of the Bible, which is the message of the Christ, the Messiah, which is the message of the Messiah's death and resurrection.

But even more specific than that, did you see there in verse 3? Explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer.

So Paul is preaching the Bible, the Christ of the Bible, the death and resurrection of the Christ of the Bible, and the necessity of the death of the Christ of the Bible.

That is his particular focus. He had to die. And there he echoes the teaching of the Lord Jesus himself in the Gospels, doesn't he, if you think? How Jesus several times taught his disciples that the Son of Man must be delivered up and suffer and die.

[13:22] This then was not a message simply pickling a past generation. It was not a message concerned with his hearers, actually, and their situation, and their story, and their needs for therapy.

It was a message concerned with the Bible. It was a message concerned with the Bible and the Christ of the Bible. Now don't get me wrong. The Christian message impacts our lives as individuals at our points of deepest need.

That's absolutely clear. Only the Christian message can do that. But our points of deepest need are often not what we think they are, and people often misunderstand what their deepest need is.

And the Christian message at the end of the day is not about you and me. You are not the centre of the universe. And the Christian Gospel is not about you.

It is for you. It is for your eternal salvation and your good and your blessing. But it is about the Christ and his death and his resurrection.

[14:34] As soon as you hear a message in a church which is becoming all about you, you know it's going astray and there is something wrong with it.

Because the message that the Apostle preached here and elsewhere was a message about the Christ. Not a message about you and me and our lives.

Now as I say, preaching needs to be relevant to our lives, and it will be if it is about the Christ. But it is about the Christ. So fairly simply then, Paul's message was not a message of therapy, it was not a message of vague spirituality, it was not a message of comedy or entertainment, it was a message concerning the Bible, a message concerning the Christ of the Bible, his death, his resurrection, the necessity of his death.

And what was his method? We see this in some detail here actually. Have a look at verse 2 again. Do you see the verbs used in verses 2 and 3?

Paul went in as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.

[15:50] Verse 3. 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.

You see the four key verbs there, describing his method. Reasoned, explained, proved, proclaimed. That's what Paul did. And that maps out I think, fairly neatly onto what today we would call evangelism and apologetics. So there is clear evangelism here.

This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ. What's Paul been doing? He's come proclaiming the Christ.

Proclaiming the Messiah. Preaching the good news of Jesus. But in addition to that now, he is reasoning from the Scriptures. He's explaining and proving.

[16:53] And that's what we might call apologetics today. And specifically, interesting, this word here that's used for proving, possibly even indicates that what Paul was doing was lining up the prophecies of the Old Testament with the events of Jesus' life and showing how they fitted together.

He's placing them side by side. So he's saying, Look here in Isaiah 52, 53, what it says about the coming Messiah. Look here in what happened in Jesus' life and death and see, see the match, see how he fulfills these prophecies.

But all of it, of course, is Bible, Bible, Bible. Everything Paul is doing here. He's reasoning, yes, but he's reasoning from the Scriptures. He's explaining and proving, yes, but he's explaining and proving the Scriptures and the Christ of the Scriptures.

So it's very much Bible method. His method is the Scriptures, quite simply. The proclamation and the proving of the Scriptures. Now you might say to me, Well, that's just because he's talking to Jews who know the Scriptures.

Well, if you think that, have a read on later today in Acts 17 and see what he does when he goes to Athens. Because actually when he goes to Athens, he does the same proclaiming and he proclaims the same message from the Bible.

[18:16] He needs to fill in some more of the basics of who God is, the creator God of all things, not an idol. But it's the same message that he's preaching which he's got from the Scriptures.

So the method, again, is the proclamation of the Christ, of the Scriptures. There's less proving, but even there, there's still proving that goes on when he's talking to Gentiles as well.

Now, this then is the Apostle's message. It's not a message of self-help and therapy.

This is his method. It's not a method of entertainment. It's not a method of antiquarianism. It's not a method of friendliness. It's quite simply a message and a method of the Scriptures and the Christ of the Scriptures.

But you may well wonder, OK, but if the Church does do that, what happens? The crucial question of our pragmatic age, does it work if we do that? And actually the passage, in God's kindness, answers even our silly, pragmatic questions.

[19:22] It works. But it works in two ways. Have a look now at the fruit of Paul's ministry. First of all, the first response to Paul's message and method is a response of persuasion.

people are persuaded. You see that in verse 4. And 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.

So some Jews, more Gentiles, were persuaded and actually it's were joined to Paul and Silas.

There's a hint there in the language of verse 4 of God's sovereignty in taking these people who've been persuaded and joining them to Paul and Silas.

God does the joining here in the original. God is sovereign so that when his message is preached and people are faithful to the biblical method, they will be joined.

He will do the joining. He will join them to the church. And that's what happens here. So we can be confident that if we stick to the apostolic message and the apostolic method, it will bear fruit.

[20:45] God will join people to the church. But that's not all that happens here because something else happens as well in verse 5 and following.

There isn't only persuasion, there is also, secondly, persecution. Do you see what happens here? The Jews are jealous. They want to keep the Gentiles out, it seems.

And so they try to raise a crowd, a rabble, a mob, to stir things up and they go looking for them.

Now they can't find them but they drag out this man Jason and they bring him before the city authorities shouting that these men who've turned the world upside down have now come here too and they're causing trouble here too.

And in particular, do you see what they're doing? They say, they're acting against the decrees of Caesar saying that there is another king, Jesus. So observe the characteristics of this response of persecution.

First of all, it arises from jealousy as persecution often does. Secondly, it is violent. It is a dangerous mob. The mob is a scary thing.

[21:58] We don't see it very often but we have seen it in our country not long ago when a mob rises up and the kind of destruction and violence that can ensue.

But also it gets cleverly political here in verses 6 and 7. Do you see that? They try to get the city authorities involved and they accuse them of effectively treason trying to make another king.

Now can you think of another episode in the Bible where the same thing happens? where they do the same thing using the authorities raising an accusation of treason with the Lord Jesus himself of course.

Remember he said if they persecute me they'll persecute you. If they treat me like this they'll treat you like this. Well here it is happening. They're actually doing exactly the same thing. They're going to the authorities trying to imply that they are stirring up a revolution by preaching another king and the word used here is the same word that's used of Caesar himself.

And of course actually you might say they were. Because when Caesar takes on a role which is only properly to be given to God there is a conflict between Caesar and King Jesus.

[23:18] You see that very quickly after the New Testament with the Roman emperor's claims to be God and demands for worship. Is there a conflict between Christ and Caesar? Absolutely there is. Because Caesar has trespassed on ground which belongs to Jesus.

So this is not a fanciful claim either. We don't want to say oh well Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world so he really wasn't trespassing on Caesar's ground. He was trespassing on Caesar's ground because Caesar was trespassing on his.

So it's political clever political opposition. And then lastly and this is why we read on to verse 15 do you see how dogged they are? How they won't let go?

Verse 13 They've gone on now to preach in Berea and they've received a very favourable response in Berea and from the Jews in Berea but verse 13 when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also they came there too agitating and stirring up

the crowds.

In other words the opponents of the gospel are so relentless it's not enough when you've left town. You leave town and they come after you. They keep going they won't let go.

[24:32] This is a very determined kind of resistance to the gospel. So what happens with the apostolic message and the apostolic method?

some believe God and his sovereignty joins them to the church. Others react with violent political and determined persecution.

Now again we live still in remarkably favourable times in this country but we don't need to look far abroad to see how this is the story of many probably most Christians in the world that they experience opposition like this and we could imagine it coming here quite quickly.

Let's think back to our opening question then. In the face of a changing culture an increasingly hostile culture with questions generated by the internal life of our church what sort of church should we be?

Well Paul gives us here a clear example doesn't he? We need to stick to the message of the Bible of the Christ of the Bible of his cross and his resurrection and we need to stick to the method of proclaiming the scriptures and defending the scriptures.

[26:07] So what should you be doing as a church? Well this is the right emphasis isn't it on the spirituality of the church that you should be concerned with this apostolic message and method with keeping the scriptures at the heart of your church.

What do you expect of your pastor? pastor? I hope you expect your pastor to love you and care for you and as appropriate visit you and see you and talk to you but I hope you are also clear that your pastor's task is to proclaim this message by this method which requires your pastor to be locked away in his study studying the scriptures each week and in that sense he's torn in two isn't he? He needs to be out among you but he needs to be protecting his time to study the scriptures. Now Paul is not primed me to say this and he didn't tell me anything along these lines but this passage tells us doesn't it?

That the life of a church needs to be focused on the message and method of the scriptures and therefore you want your pastor to be devoted to the study of the scriptures and you need to make sure that he's doing that and to protect that.

What do you want to happen in your youth and children's work? In your groups that meet before the service and midweek? What should they be focused on? Now it's great for children to have fun but that is not actually the aim.

[27:43] The aim is to bring them to the scriptures to drink. Now here's a test for you to see if you have absorbed this message or not.

Imagine your child comes home or you hear that somebody's child has come home and has said, there's just so much Bible in our meeting. What's your reaction?

As your reaction I'll go and talk to the leaders and tell them it's just a bit too heavy at the moment.

Now I know, I know, I know, it could be, it's conceivable that such a meeting could be too heavy.

But I think it's probably very, very unlikely in our culture and our times. Is that your action? Do you think I'll go and tell them to soft pedal a bit and get less Bible in the meeting? I'll phone them up and give them a roasting.

You may be thinking it never happens. It happens all over the place. It happens to pastors with their sermons. I know a pastor who receives a note. I think it's even a handwritten note which is rather lovely, isn't it?

[28:43] Every time he crosses 25 minutes he gets a note. I know of youth workers who have parents coming to say them saying it's just too heavy and dull, you're putting them off the gospel by having so much Bible.

It is conceivable, yes, when it hits an hour and a half, maybe, but probably they're a long way from that generally speaking. What would your reaction be if your child or a child said that?

Would you sit down and say actually rejoice that you have a club which is teaching you the word of God, which is his living voice. Celebrate that you're hearing about the Lord Jesus from his word.

This is an amazing privilege that we have to do this and to do it freely. It's an extraordinary thing. I know it's hard work sometimes. We find that has grown up too in church.

Would you say that? We know it's hard to concentrate on some preachers sometimes, especially that Williams bloke. It's hard to listen to them sometimes, but it's the word of God and so we work hard at it.

[29:46] And that's what we need to do in our clubs as well, is to work hard at listening because this is God's message and this is God's method. Is that what you would say? Or would you want them to soft pedal a bit?

Then again for us as individuals of any age, if you're at school, we talked about this a bit beforehand, and you have friends and neighbours and family members who do not know the Lord Jesus.

What is it that they need to hear? Maybe that there are all sorts of useful conversations you could have with them, but the focus of what they need to hear is Christ and his death and his resurrection. Now maybe sometimes you need to have a more philosophical argument about this or that or the other. A bit of ground clearing maybe. But actually the focus of our conversations with our friends and our neighbours and our school friends and our family members who are not Christians needs to be the Lord Jesus, doesn't it?

This is the apostolic message. We need to be introducing people to him. So I think this passage, I hope you find this passage to be good news for us this morning, because it can be quite bewildering, can't it?

[31:01] In a culture we feel under pressure, we feel isolated, we feel like a small minority, yes, it's quite a nice full room. How many people are there in Ealing?

This is a tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of the people who live within half a mile of this place. You're a minority, you're a tiny minority, you can feel that sometimes.

You can feel the world is increasingly hostile in what it's doing. And that can make us wonder, should we be doing something different? Should we change? Should we tweak? Should we adjust? I take it this is a good news passage, because it tells us very simply what the Apostles' priorities were in his message and in his method.

And that's liberating. We don't need to be wringing our hands thinking, what do we do? What should we fill our meetings with? Oh no, how can we reach this world? Stick to the Apostles' message. Stick to the Apostles' method. Christ and the Bible. And lastly, as we draw to a close, let me just say a word to those of you who are inquiring and would not consider yourselves Christians here this morning.

[32:12] What should you be inquiring about? If that's you, what questions do you need to be asking? What should your concern be? This passage gives us a wonderfully clear answer, doesn't it?

The question for you is the question which the Lord Jesus himself asked his disciples. who do you say that I am? Who is Jesus?

And in particular, can I draw your attention again to verse 3? The Apostle explained and proved that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer.

So if you're not a Christian here this morning, let me leave you with this question. Do you believe that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer? Do you understand why it was necessary for the Christ to suffer?

If God willed to save a people, which he did, their sin made it necessary for the Christ to suffer. It is the only way.

[33:14] And do you believe that this morning? Because one of the big reasons I think why people aren't Christians is because they just don't think they need to be. The Lord Jesus described himself as a doctor come to heal the sick.

You only go to the doctor if you know you're sick. And the scriptures tell us that we are all sick and in need of healing. And that his death is the sole means by which we can be healed.

And if you're not a Christian this morning, that is the big question, the big challenge for you from this passage. Do you see that? Do you see that he had to do it, to save you?

That there is no other way for you to be reconciled to the God who made you. Let's pray together.