

"A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISTIC PROCLAMATION"

(Acts 17:1-15)

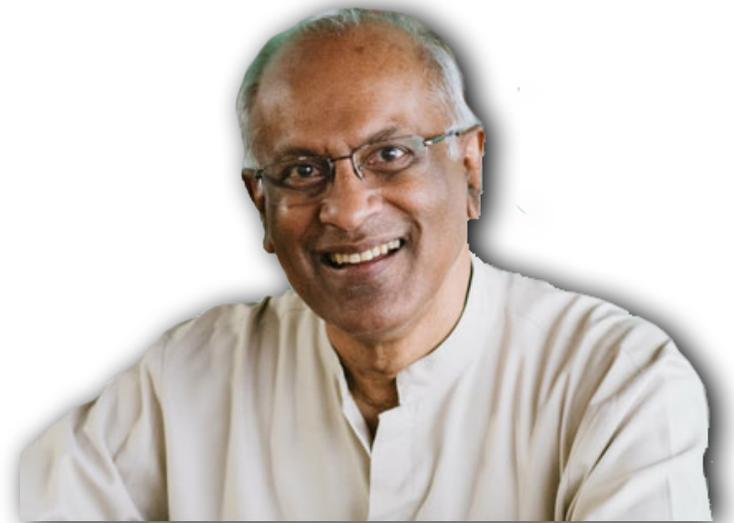
(Ajith Fernando)

Six key words (all verbs) describe the evangelism of Paul and Silas; they are helpful in the construction of a biblical theology of evangelistic proclamation (vv. 2-4). (1) Paul "reasoned" (*dialegomai*) in the synagogues (v. 2). This Greek word occurs ten times in Acts 17-24 in reference to Paul's ministry¹ and became "a technical term for Paul's teaching in the Synagogue."² Scholars have not reached a consensus about the meaning of this term. In two of its other three occurrences in the New Testament (Mark 9:34; Jude 9) *dialegomai* has the idea of "argue, fight with words." In Acts, however, "it approaches the meaning of give an address, preach."³

Many have given *dialegomai* the meaning of dialogue, but that does not seem to be the primary focus of that word. Fürst thinks that the audience was permitted to ask questions.⁴ According to Marshall, in Acts "dialogue or debate arises . . . as a result of the initial proclamation. . . . The objective is always to correct misunderstandings of the gospel."⁵ David Williams suggests that "instead of straight teaching, as in the synagogues of the East, [Paul] seems to have proceeded by means of 'discussion.'" The appearance of *dialegomai* "here for the first time in Acts . . . may indicate a change of style in response to a different environment."⁶ A recent detailed study of Paul's preaching by D. W. Kemmler also suggests that dialogue may be included along with formal and continuous discourse.⁷

Whether or not the word *dialegomai* implies discussions, the record in verses 2-3 shows that the viewpoints of the hearers were given due weight in Paul's evangelistic preaching. Yet we should note that *dialegomai* is not used in Acts in the philosophical sense in which it is used in classical Greek. As Schrenk explains, "in the sphere of revelation there is no question of reaching an idea through dialectic."⁸ God has spoken, and we are called to proclaim that message by expounding it. But in our proclamation we will face objections and questions that need to be carefully answered in order to prove (*paratithemi*, v. 3; see [3], below) the validity of the Christian scheme. Today we call this apologetics.

(2) How the reasoning that constituted apologetics was done is explained in verse 3 with two more key words: "explaining" (*dianoigo*) and "proving" (*paratithemi*). *Dianoigo* literally



¹ See 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8,9; 20:7, 9; 24:12, 25.

² D. Fürst, NIDNTT, 3:821.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, "Inter-Faith Dialogue in the New Testament," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 13, 3 (July 1989): 199. BAGD states that this word refers to "lectures which were likely to end in disputations." G. Schrenk ("*διαλεγομαι*," TDNT, 2:94-95) does not leave room for this interpretation.

⁶ Williams, *Acts*, 294.

⁷ D. W. Kemmler, *faith and Human reason: A Study of Paul's Method of preaching As Illustrated by 1-2 Thessalonians and Acts 17, 24* (Leiden: Brill, 1975, 35. Cited in Larkin, *Acts*, 245.

⁸ Schrenk, "*διαλεγομαι*," TDNT, 2:94.

means to open, and the idea behind this word is well expressed in Luke 24:32: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" The subject expounded from the Scriptures was that "the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead"(Acts17:3a).

(3) Such an exposition would have encountered opposition from Jews, to whom the cross was a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23). Thus, to the exposition Paul added "proving" (*paratithemi*) which means he carefully answered questions posed to him, responded to their objections, and demonstrated the validity of his claims.⁹

(4) Paul "proclaimed" (*katangelo*) a clear message about Jesus Christ to the Thessalonians (v. 3b). The outline of his preaching given in verse 3 resembles the summary of his gospel presented in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. David Williams observes, "If there were any doubts earlier about the centrality of the death of Jesus in Paul's preaching . . . they are dispelled."¹⁰ As we pointed out earlier, the Paul of the letters and the Paul of Acts had the same message.

(5) The next two words, "persuade" and "joined" (v.4), describe the response to the message. The aim of apologetics is not simply discussion so that we can know what each other believes. Rather, it is to "persuade" (*peitho*). This verb is particularly relevant because Luke uses it seven times in Acts to describe Paul's evangelism.¹¹ In 2 Corinthians 5:11 Paul himself said, "We try to persuade men." This use of *peitho* has been defined as "to convince someone to believe something and to act on the basis of what is recommended."¹² Such confidence in our message derives from the conviction that we are bearers of the definitive revelation from God to the human race. If the Creator and Lord of the universe has given a final message to the human race and we know it, then we must do everything in our power and within our principles to bring people to appropriate that message into their lives. Evangelism, in other words, aims at a response, a response so comprehensive that it can be called a conversion.

(6) Conversion is also implied in the word translated "joined" (*proskleroo*) which appears only here in the New Testament. There is some question about its exact meaning, but whatever it is, the idea is that the new believers joined the company of the apostles.¹³ Their minds had been changed and they had made a decision about the truth. They took the next step: "They attached themselves to the missionaries, casting their lot with them, come what may."¹⁴

The above discussion shows us that evangelism involves proclaiming the message of Christ, especially his death and resurrection. The proclamation may¹⁵ include discussion, and it aims at persuading people so that they will be converted to Christ and incorporated into the church. This is not a comprehensive definition of evangelism, but we can say that all biblical evangelism must have these features.

⁹ My discussion of the two words has been influenced by A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures [in the Greek New Testament]*, vol. 3, Acts, 267-268.

¹⁰ Williams, Acts, 294-295.

¹¹ See 17:4; 18:4; 19:8, 26; 26:28; 28:23, 24; cf. 2 Cor. 5:11. It appeared six times in Acts before chapter 17, but 17:4 is the first time it appears in connection with Paul's evangelism.

¹² Louw and Nida, 423.

¹³ In this context *proskleroo* can mean something like "'to throw one's lot with' or 'to identify themselves with' or 'to become a part for he soma group as'" (Louw and Nida, 449). Zerwick and Grosvenor, on the other hand, take it as a "theological passive" (*Analysis*, 407), that is, a passive used in order to avoid directly naming God as agent (Zerwick, *Greek*, 76).

¹⁴ Harrison, Acts, 276.

¹⁵ This "may" implies that discussion is not basic but is almost always helpful.