

# Jesus Is the Christ

Acts 17:1–15

January 20, 2002

There is always a fight. Whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is rightly proclaimed, whenever lives are changed, whenever the true church is established, there is always a struggle. Some believe in him, and some do not, and therein lies the difficulty. One would think it would all be sweetness and light, but it is not. One would think that the war weary world would welcome the gospel of salvation, but it does not. The claim that this one person is the only mediator between God and humanity, is the only word from God to us, is the way, the truth, and the life, and is Lord of the universe is met with hesitation, reluctance, and resentment.

Some believe in him, and the others who do not believe cannot stand it. Some believe in Jesus Christ, and the unbelievers are disdainful and scornful of the followers of Christ. Some believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and the ones who do not believe hate the ones who do. The truth of the matter is that the believers have met a new love in life, a new source of life, a new sustenance for life, a new goal for life, and the unbelievers cannot tolerate it. They can tolerate everything else except belief in Jesus Christ, but that they cannot tolerate. They can be open to everything else except belief in Jesus Christ, but they cannot be open to that. So, there is always a fight whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is rightly proclaimed, heard, and believed. We should never be surprised.

Paul and Silas must have come to have expected it. They could count on it as sure as the sunrise. Resistance seems to have flared up everywhere they went. But they kept on preaching, because that was what God called them to do. They kept on preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, wherever the Spirit led them, first to the Jews, then to the Greeks. Some of each believed. Some of each came to faith. Some of each joined themselves to Paul and Silas, which is to say that they joined the church. And so began and grew that new creation which God was working in the world, the church of Jesus Christ, consisting of both Jew and Greek, coming together in a new and different relationship, one for which there was and is absolutely no human accounting. There is no other explanation. Not only has God reconciled us to himself in Jesus Christ, but also he has reconciled us to each other, which, in our eyes, may appear all the more remarkable. Forgiveness is one thing. Overcoming ancient hostilities is another. Going from getting right with God to getting right with neighbors was thought to be going from preaching to meddling.

We cannot help but think today that it must have been those who had some interest in the hostilities who objected so strenuously to the proclamation of the gospel, to the conversion and new faith of the believers, to the coming together and growth of the new church, neither Jewish nor Greek, but both, in being Christian. There must have been some who benefitted from the division of humanity, from the nursing of old grudges, from the festering of old wounds, from the separation of communities along racial, ethnic, and religious lines. It is interesting that in today's reading the perpetrators of trouble quickly availed themselves of both the "wicked fellows of the rabble" and the "city authorities." They formed their own unholy alliances to counter the new alliance forged by God. It is important to know one's enemies, to know who they are, and it is important for the church to realize that, when it has been the church of Jesus Christ, when it has taught the scriptures, when it has proclaimed the gospel, when it has brought people together, has always had enemies in the world.

All of this came from a Bible study and a sermon. Can you imagine? Did you know people fought over such things? Have you ever seen such a commotion? For three weeks Paul taught from the Old Testament that God's Christ had to die and be raised from dead. Then he clinched it with a gospel sermon: This Jesus is the Christ. The man I have been telling you about is the Son of God. The one who was crucified was also resurrected, just as was prophesied, He died for our sins. He was raised for our eternal lives. Jesus is the one. And some were persuaded, but some were not. How is it with us today? How many believe? How many are not persuaded?

What happened to Paul and Silas has continued through the centuries. When the city of Rome fell in A.D. 410, the old pagans blamed the fall of the empire on the Christians. "The old gods of Rome are punishing us," they said, "because the people deserted them and worshiped Christ instead." You see, the enemies of Christ are opportunists. When people believe, they attack the church. When the church grows, they attack the church. When the state fails and even falls, they attack the church. Whatever happens, they blame it on the preachers of the gospel and the followers of Jesus Christ.

Is it really any different today? We live in a country which was founded largely by Christians seeking the freedom to worship as they believed, which led to a number of concomitant freedoms we all enjoy, but which is today a country in whose public schools it is largely illegal to teach even about Christianity or the contributions of the Christian church to the larger good of the world, in terms of the intellect, philosophy, art, music, literature, democracy, human rights, compassion, science, medicine, economics, and on and on. At the very least, this represents a profound failure of gratitude. Moreover, it constitutes intellectual falsehood and dishonesty. How can institutions and a whole culture which owe so much to Christianity so easily reject it out of hand? And yet, the Christian faith and church are ridiculed and belittled. There is always a struggle.

At the same time, it has been widely reported for the last two weeks that in the public schools of the state of California children are being required to learn the history and the faith of Islam, which had nothing to do with the formation of this nation, children reading and memorizing passages from the Koran, taking Muslim names, mimicking Muslim garb, learning Muslim practices, as if it were a religion of peace. And yet, little if anything has been or can be said about the contributions of the Muslim faith to the arts of war, to the practice of despotism, to the repression of women, to the spread of poverty, to the promotion of illiteracy, to the support of terrorism, and on and on. That would be politically incorrect. And yet this, too, constitutes intellectual fraud and dishonesty. It flirts not only with exotic religion but with social, political, economic, and military disaster. It is public irresponsibility of the highest order. You see, the enemies of Christ are opportunists. When people believe, they attack the church. When the church grows, they attack the church. When the state fails, they attack the church. Whatever happens, they blame it on the preachers of the gospel and the followers of Jesus Christ. And if, along the way, a nation falls or a culture is corrupted, so be it.

But what they cannot take away from us is this: God's Christ had to die and be raised from dead, and Jesus is the Christ. What Paul taught then is still true today. And still today, some are persuaded. Still today, some join the church. Still today, some are reconciled to God and so to each other. Still today, Jew and Gentile come together, slave and free, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, black and white, Hispanic and Asian, Indian and European, Republican and Democrat, American and not American, many languages, one people, one heart, united in Christ, forged into a single church. And among those not persuaded, among those not drawn into

the faith, there is always a resentment, a will to fight, and a desire to destroy. We must not be surprised by it, but neither should we be threatened or defeated by it.

The other side of the lesson is this: neither shall we seek a false peace. We shall not shrink from the attack that comes, and neither shall we dilute or minimize the gospel in order to try to avoid the attack. We must continue to teach the Bible, cover to cover, book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, word by word. And we must continue to preach the gospel, that the Christ must suffer and be raised, that Jesus is the Christ, that he died for the forgiveness of our sin, and that he was raised for our eternal lives. This is what we teach today. This is what we proclaim today. This is what we believe today. This is that in which we rejoice today. This is our good hope for tomorrow. We can do no other.

The reality of our situation here in America is that if you invite someone to church today, others may look at you in a funny way, but it is highly unlikely that anyone will drag you out of your house and haul you before the city authorities. If you share with someone the importance of the Bible to you, they may think it a little odd, it is unlikely that anyone will run you out of the city. If you suggest to someone that Jesus is the center of human history and the key to human life, they may wonder why you believe that, but it is unlikely, in this country, that you will be imprisoned. At the same time, there are tremendous battles going on elsewhere. Muslims are slaughtering Christians in Sudan and Indonesia. The Chinese government is executing Christians. It seems that here life and limb are safe. We are more likely to suffer only ridicule and being ostracized.

Of course, this raises the question for us: Is the church in America today clear enough about the content and the significance of our faith to disturb the unbelievers? Do we make it plain enough that the lordship of Jesus Christ eliminates all other claimants to the throne? Do we make it plain enough that the gospel of the forgiveness of sin involves the confession of sin, which wreaks havoc with the promotion of the cultural value of self-esteem? Do we make it plain enough that the gospel of the grace of God stands against all human claims to accomplishment? Do we make it plain enough that the reality of the world to come relativizes all claims to the absolute in this world? Are we teaching the Bible and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ?

On the other hand, even while the culture here increasingly marginalizes and ignores us, often with our complicity, there are tremendous forces within the church that threaten to undo us. There are struggles within as well as outside. However, we learn from today's reading that church unity is a result of the gospel, not a presupposition of the gospel and not a necessary precondition for the gospel. In fact, the unity of the church is a free gift from God and not a human accomplishment at all. It is a product of the gospel without being simply the goal or the purpose of the gospel. We can receive it as a gift, we can honor it with our lives, but we cannot achieve it with our efforts. So, it is our responsibility and high privilege to teach the Bible and preach the gospel. If we stick to that, God will bless us with the unity. But if we stray away from it, there will be no possibility of church unity.

There is always a fight. Whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is rightly proclaimed, there is always a fight. Some believe in him, and some do not, and therein lies the difficulty. That is the basic division of humanity. Some believe in him, and the ones who do not believe cannot stand it. Some believe in Jesus Christ, and the unbelievers are disdainful and scornful of the followers of Christ. Some believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and the ones who do not believe hate the ones who do. The believers have met a new love in life, and the unbelievers cannot tolerate it. So, there is always a fight whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is rightly

proclaimed. We should be aware of that, but we need not worry about it. What are we to do? Our responsibility is to teach the Bible, to preach the gospel, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to obey him.

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be all praise, honor, and glory  
now and forever! Amen.*

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