

Reasonable Reasoning

Acts 17:1-4

By Phillip G. Kayser

One of our PCA churches in New York was right next to the trade center, and the senior pastor there, Dr. Timothy Keller, has had some remarkable ministry with Muslims since 9/11. From time to time he will engage in debates. One time he was debating a Muslim scholar in front of a university audience. The Islamic imam gave his viewpoint that God is radically one and cannot exist as three persons – that the doctrine of the Trinity is blasphemy to Muslims, and to call Jesus divine is blasphemy. Dr. Keller responded that there is indeed one God, but that God exists in three Persons, and that God the Son took to Himself a human nature in order to be our redeemer. This is the heart of Christianity. He said that the doctrine of Christ as the divine-human mediator is a most treasured possession for the Christian, but that it is blasphemy to Islam. And he proceeded to make a case for Christianity and against Islam.

Since they had been so clear on this, Tim Keller was perplexed when the first question from the floor was prefaced with this statement: “It seems obvious that both of you men are saying the same thing. Both you men really believe the same thing.” Both Dr. Keller and the Muslim imam were taken aback by this idiocy. And both assured the student that they were saying diametrically opposite things. But this student kept insisting that they really were not that far off from each other and were both saying the same thing. This student was not stupid. He did well in school. But his foolishness comes from the fact that he had been brain washed with the philosophy of Pluralism (where all viewpoints, religions and arguments are considered to be true – just different perspectives on life). And it was too much for him to accept an either/or position on these fundamental issues. In fact, Pluralism fails on the subject of logic.

And we are going to face more and more of this kind of thinking in America. How do we reason with Americans reasonably? Well, there really is no new thing under the sun. They had pluralism back then as well. The Romans were very pluralistic and were very skeptical of any absolutes. You could believe anything you wanted, so long as you didn't question the state. That was one absolute that they held to.

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How do you reason with a people who are Pluralistic? The approach of the Emerging Church is to throw out reason, logic, and theology as being too sterile. They opt instead for emotion, relationship, and experience. Now Paul never denied emotion, relationship and experience, but everything for Him was founded on the Word. Everything flowed from doctrine. For Paul, the Christian faith was a reasonable faith; it was a logical faith. And the emerging church will say, “But people no longer accept such reasoning. They don’t want doctrine. They want something that is relevant.” But Paul had a total confidence in the power of God’s Word, God’s grace and God’s Gospel to save. My kids use an analogy of a gun. You’ve got a Gospel gun in your hand, and your attacker laughs at you and says, “I don’t believe in guns.” You don’t put down your gun simply because he doesn’t believe in it. You pull the trigger and make him a believer. Right? And that’s the way it is with the Gospel. You pull the trigger by *using* God’s Word and watch its power at work as God changes people according to His sovereign plan. We have a reasonable faith, and we need to learn how to use it reasonably. But we also have a powerful faith that God brings into the experience of His elect. There is no disjunction between reason and experience in Christianity. Which means that the Gospel can impact an intellectual, but it can also impact anyone. And I think this little paragraph illustrates how Paul reasoned with unbelievers. There are nine principles in verses 1-4.

I. Triage: Focus especially on those who are most receptive (v. 1) but be open to God’s sovereign grace to work anywhere (previous chapter).

The first principle can be summed up in the word “Triage.” Let me define this for you. In the medical arena, triage is a process of sorting injured and sick people into groups based on their likelihood of benefitting from immediate medical care. It doesn’t mean that you won’t work on others later (if there is time and they are still alive), but you make priorities based on established medical principles. You would burn out if you tried to reach everybody. Triage is used in emergency rooms, battlefields and disaster sites where there are limited resources to care for people medically. And those medical personnel know that they will save far fewer lives if they don’t pace themselves and engage in triage. So that’s where the word “triage” comes from. But the word triage can be used for any attempt at allocating a scarce resource to those who will most likely benefit from it.

Paul’s time and energy were exceedingly scarce. How does he determine what cities he will preach in and what cities he will skip? He can’t

preach in all of them. He only had so much time and energy to go around. So Paul tried to focus on places, cities and people where his time could be leveraged to maximum impact. Once he reached a key city, he would encourage that church to reach out to the areas that he missed. You can see hints of that in this passage. Verse 1 says, **Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.** That last phrase gives one of Paul's principles that helped him to engage in triage. He ordinarily skipped cities that did not have a synagogue. God on occasion led Paul otherwise, but even in Philippi we saw that Paul was looking for a synagogue or group of Jews when he went out to the edge of the water. The reason for that is that Paul didn't have to prove that the Scriptures were the word of God, that there was only one God, that the moral law continued to apply. He didn't have to convince them of judgment, sin and other doctrines. He only had to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah. An added benefit was that synagogues almost always had Gentiles associated with them who were curious about the Scriptures. So it was an ideal place to go. When Lydia came to Christ, Paul knew that he had a key player, and it was worth staying awhile. But the point is that Paul didn't have time to talk to everybody. He talked first to those he thought might be most receptive and the most key.

We have three cities mentioned in verse 1. Amphipolis was about a day's journey from Philippi. It was an incredibly strategic city. As one author stated, "Amphipolis was some thirty miles southwest of Philippi. Formerly capital of the first division of Macedonia and a 'free city,' it was important for its strategic position, controlling access to the Hellespont and the Black Sea. It would have been a significant place for witness, but Luke did not indicate that Paul carried on any mission there or anywhere else along the route to Thessalonica."¹ Why? There was no synagogue there. Apollonia was another day's journey. He didn't stay there either. Why? There was no synagogue there. When Christ commissioned Paul, he told Paul to start with Jews and then work out to the Gentiles. It took much less work to start with people who (at least in some ways) were easier to convince and who were in some ways more receptive.

We would do well to not waste our time arguing with people who aren't interested. Sometimes God will guide us to do so, but Christ's warning was, **Do not give what is holy to the dogs nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear**

¹ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2001), p. 360.

you in pieces. Even with the Jews, he would stop talking to them if they weren't interested. And this chapter definitely illustrates that. The principle is that we must focus our efforts on those who are most receptive. There are exceptions by God's guidance, but you can't reason with people who have an attitude, "My mind is made up; don't confuse me with the facts." You just say, "OK." And move on. I think if we would exercise triage, there would be a lot less frustrated pagans, and much more time spent with those who are already prepared by God to benefit. So don't argue for the sake of arguing. Reason with people strategically.

II. Reason: Show enough respect for logic and for people's intellects that you are willing to reason (v. 2a)

The second word that I would like you to remember is the word "reason." Verse 2 says, **Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures.** The Greek word for "reasoned" means "to mingle thought with thought" (Thayers). It has two basic implications: 1) Paul didn't just rant, he dialogued with them and 2) he used reason to do so. Any time people ask you to turn off your brains and trust, you know that you are dealing with something bad. And the church's modern hatred for academic studies and preoccupation with relevance, experience and feelings is not a good sign. Cults are often irrational and want you to have a blind trust. Rome calls for implicit trust. But the religion of the Bible is a very reasonable faith. It is logical, orderly and satisfying to the mind.

That doesn't mean that people will *respond* in reasonable ways. We've already seen that Paul has been abused by people who don't want to be confused by the facts. They can't successfully argue with him, so they run him out of town. But we should not allow our culture's distaste for logic and reason to make us quit giving it to them. You don't drop the gun simply because people don't think they believe in guns. You don't drop reason simply because people say that they don't believe in it. God believes in the use of reason, and God blesses reasoning with success. The use of logic and sound reasoning is part of God's strategy. This is one of my major criticisms with the Emerging Church Movement. They are adapting their methodology to what people want, not to what God's Word demands. God's Word demands reasoning.

III. Authority: Ground your arguments in the authority of the Word (v. 2b)

But I want you to notice that Paul's reasoning was always anchored in the authority of God's Word. Verse 2 says that he **reasoned with them from the Scriptures**. This is where Paul's presuppositionalism comes in. He didn't argue from a so-called neutral stance. There is no such thing as neutrality. People always assume an ultimate authority, and that authority must be challenged if it is not the Word of God.

And this is one of the principal areas that we err in American Christianity. We don't tend to reason from the Scripture. There is emotion, there is *sometimes* use of logic, but more often there are preferences, dislikes and lots of logical fallacies. It is rare to see two Christians argue about a subject where both sides are reasoning from the Scriptures. I've heard people shoot down Scriptural arguments, but not respond with Scriptural arguments of their own. But it is not your opinion that is more powerful than any two-edged sword. It is the Scripture that carries that power. And I would urge you to ground your arguments in the authority of the Word of God. Otherwise, it's just the authority of your mind or someone else's mind or your passions or dislikes that is being used. That's humanism. When you debate on Facebook or other forums, check the degree to which the Scriptures really are your authority.

That doesn't mean that people will like your authority. Even our own flesh resists God's law. But keep plugging away with the authority of God's Word. God Himself stands behind it, and if you are to hope for long-term success, you will need His help. Don't pick up useless weapons. It's God's Word that is sharper than any two-edged sword.

IV. Information: Give enough information (v. 3a)

The fourth word in your outlines is information. Verse 3 starts with the word "**explaining**." It's made up of three Greek words - *dia*, which means "through," *ana*, which means "back again" (so the idea of the first two words is to go through and back and forth) and then the third Greek word, *oigo*, which means "to open." So here are some dictionary definitions: "to open by dividing or drawing asunder (*dia*), to open thoroughly (what had been closed)" (Thayer), "to open up completely" (NAS), to thoroughly open and explain. So the idea is that there is a thorough ransacking of the Scriptures on this subject. They aren't content to just debate a verse or two. They want to see how all of this fits together. This means that you've got to collect information. And if you don't have the information, the respectable thing to do is to say, "You know, we ought to get out a concordance and

study this a bit more before we discuss it further. We are at an impasse and we need more information.” Some people are not patient enough to do that. They want an answer right now (even if it is the wrong answer), and they don’t want to study it out further. But for a disagreement to be resolved, both parties need to be willing to dig out the information from the Bible.

V. Answers: Answer objections and questions carefully (v. 3b)

The fifth word in your outlines is “answers.” Verse 3 says, **explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.’** The word “demonstrating” implies that there were objections to Jesus suffering and dying. Surely the Messiah can’t suffer, can he?! He’s prophesied to be a king who will reign over the whole world. And Paul answers this reasonable misunderstanding by putting beside them (that’s the literal Greek) Scriptures that showed that before Jesus could reign as king He had to first of all suffer, die and rise again. Paul went on to apply those Scriptures to Jesus and show how He perfectly fits all the evidence. So Paul is willing to answer objections.

We shouldn’t get upset when people object to our theology. Coming to cognitive rest (where you say, “Ahhh! Now I get it!”) is a complex process, and often it requires repeatedly answering questions, misunderstandings and objections that people might have. It takes patience to reason reasonably as Paul did. But we must be prepared to give answers. I have sometimes gotten impatient with giving answers to objections, but that is not good.

VI. Focus: Do not be diverted from your central subject (v. 3c)

However, point VI shows that giving answers needs to be focused or you’ll never get anywhere. Verse 3 shows that the focus of Paul’s discourse was to prove that Jesus is the Christ and that they needed to submit to Jesus as Lord and Savior. If you know much about arguments, you know how easy it is for people to divert you down all kinds of rabbit trails. And they are interesting rabbit trails. That’s why you go down them. And for those of you who are internationals, let me explain that a rabbit trail is an idiom taken from hunting. When a hunting dog is chasing a deer, he follows the scent of the deer and leads you forward. But every once in a while, an immature dog will smell a rabbit, and be interested in that and take you down the wrong path. He loses his focus. And this happens in arguments all the time. Jehovah’s Witnesses are great at deliberately doing this. They will try to get you off the subject that you are strong on by asking you tempting questions.

And as soon as you bite, and start answering that objection, you are down a pathway never to come back to your strong point. But it's easy for that to happen in any dialogue. It's happened in our house. You start arguing one point, but a peripheral question comes up, and that leads to another thought, and another thought, and before you know it, you are far removed from the original subject. Paul maintains a focus, and keeps the conversation coming back to the main point of difference – Jesus Christ. And I think that is a great illustration of how to be effective in reasoning on any subject. We must maintain focus.

VII. Convince: Our goal is to see not only the mind, but a person's actions changed (v. 4 - "persuaded")

The seventh word is "convince." Verse 4 says, **and some of them were persuaded.** The Greek means to persuade or to endeavor to convince or to win over to a point of view. Our goal in debate is not to simply win the argument (and to lose the person). It is to convince people of the truth. You can see the opposite result in some people who know there is nothing more they can say – they've lost the argument (they know they look foolish so they are not going to open their mouth anymore), but you can tell that they still aren't convinced. Some forms of argument lend themselves to winning without convincing. In fact, many of the logical fallacies are this way. I have a friend who uses the logical fallacy of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, which in English is usually known as Misuse of Authority. When he can't argue an exegetical point, he says, "Well, all of the best commentators" or "all modern commentators disagree with you." And my response is, "Well, if they all disagree, they must have some pretty good reasons for that disagreement. I still haven't heard any of those reasons why this is wrong. It's reasons I want to hear, not counting of noses." But some people are intimidated by an argument like that. Who am I to oppose such great scholars? If Calvin said it, then it must be right. If the Supreme Court said it, then it must be right.

Another logical fallacy is Chronological Fallacy. It is discarding a thought as outdated. Political ideas like Reagan's were discredited as being "Neanderthal" or "medieval." They are outdated, so they can't be right. Arguments in favor of modesty are labeled Victorian or Puritanical. Well, who cares if Americans think it is outdated. The question is, "Is this what God thinks? Is it right?"

Argumentum ad hominem is where you can't win with facts, so you attack the credibility of the person, or you call him a racist, or you do something that makes the man go on the defensive or give up the fight.

Politicians do this all the time. As soon as they can make the term “racist” stick (however off the wall the accusation might be) the person gives up the fight. If you study all of the logical fallacies you will find that they are not designed to convince the person you are arguing with. They are designed to force a win. And I hear logical fallacies among the children quite frequently. I highly recommend Engel’s book on logical fallacies or A.J. Hoover’s book, *Don’t You Believe It!* But we need to teach our children that the goal of debate is not to win, but to truly convince. And to that end, I highly recommend that you include the study of logic in your children’s curriculum. We’re now using a new one developed by a home school family.

VIII. Connect: Help people join the cause of Christ (v. 4b)

The eighth word is “connect.” Verse 4 goes on to say, **and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.** Paul’s reasoning was not considered done until people put their new beliefs into practice. Here it says that they “joined” Paul and Silas. They were willing to join the cause of Christ that Paul and Silas were preaching. They weren’t closet believers, Sunday-go-to-meeting Christians, or pew sitting Christians. They joined the ranks of these hard-core activists. And their lives were never the same.

So we have seen a strategy by Paul of triage, reason, Biblical authority, giving of information, answering objections, maintaining focus, convincing and then engaging the people into action. I think that is a great model for reasonable reasoning today. Paul was not like the Greeks who argued just for the fun of arguing. Paul always had a goal in mind and that goal was building people up and seeing them conformed to Christ by believing the truth. And this is exactly Paul’s goal for all of our communications with each other in Ephesians 4:29 – **Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.** May our speech impart grace to the hearers as we reason with others reasonably.

IX. Show: Your arguments will be more convincing if people are attracted to the truth through your lifestyle (v. 4c)

There is one more word that I have included in the outlines. It’s the word “show.” Why were they joined to Paul and Silas? Why doesn’t it say that they were joined to the Lord? After all, they *were* joined to the Lord. But it says here that they **joined Paul and Silas.** I believe it is because Paul and Silas had lives that so reflected the grace of God that they attracted God’s elect. It wasn’t their outward appearance that attracted the people. The

only detailed description of what Paul looked like that we have outside the Bible is not very complimentary. It says, "... at length they saw a man coming [Paul] of a small stature with meeting eyebrows, bald head, bow-legged, strongly built, hollow-eyed, with a large crooked nose..."² But it went on to say that he was "full of grace." He was ugly physically, but he was attractive in another way. And as so often happens, our arguments are given a better hearing when our lifestyle matches up. Our apologetics is attractive when the beauty of the Lord is upon us. We need to show the reality of our reasoning with our lives. Or as he told these very Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, "...**our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.**" Paul was showing the reality of what He had been talking about. His life matched his words. They could see his love for them.

And I think this is highlighted by whom it was that believed. Verse 4 says, **And some of them were persuaded.** There weren't very many Jews; just "some." When people are satisfied with hypocrisy (as many of those Jews were – they had a form of godliness, but denied the power thereof), they are not as impacted by Paul's demonstration of Word and power. They are quite used to a disjunction between the two. They are satisfied. But verse 4 goes on to say, **and a great multitude of devout Greeks.** The Gentile God fearers who were at the synagogue were usually attending because they were left empty by their Greek philosophy. They were attracted by the monotheism and ethical absolutes of the Jews. They hadn't become Jews yet – probably because they saw emptiness there as well. But as soon as they heard Paul's message, they knew that this was what their soul had been longing for. Within three weeks there was a multitude of these Gentiles who had joined the church. God had obviously planted a hunger there. And what Paul was *showing* matched up with what he was preaching.

The text goes on to say, **and not a few leading women.** Why does he mention that? I believe that the Gospel had a special appeal to women of that day because of the way that Greek and Roman cultures treated them. They not only had to contend with the emptiness of Greek philosophy, and the chauvinistic culture, but they were often degraded by Greek sexual practices which left the women devastated and filled with self-loathing when they gave in to the practices. At least Judaism didn't have those practices. But

² *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 1:7. Though this is an apocryphal work, Sir Ramsay believes that this account of Paul must be accurate. It was written within 100 years of Paul.

anyone who knows much about the corrupt Judaism of Paul's day knows that it wasn't living up to the biblical ideal. Women were not exalted by the rabbis of that day. So when these women heard the Gospel preached from the Jewish Scriptures, and they saw how the middle wall between Jew and Gentile was broken down, and that all (male and female) equally have access to the Father, they responded with joy. They found the Gospel message liberating, fulfilling and satisfying. They were attracted to the Gospel of Jesus. And I think ultimately that is the greatest argument. People are attracted when they see the Gospel lived out.

We are not saying that experience is a substitute for logical reasoning. We are saying that if we reasoned rightly, it should transform our lives. One of the most logical men in history was Blaise Pascal. He was a prodigy child – a genius. He was a mathematician, engineer, and philosopher. But it was not logic alone that made him a Christian. He was very satisfied intellectually with the Scriptures. But there was something more. After his death, his servant found a piece of paper sewn into the lining of his coat. And part of that paper spoke of the experience of his theology. It said,

The year of grace 1654.

Monday, 23 November, . . .

From about half-past ten in the evening
until about half past midnight.

FIRE.

The God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.

Not of the philosophers and intellectuals.

Certitude, certitude, [so there was his reason engaged. But he went on – “certitude”] feeling, joy, peace . . .

joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. . .

Renunciation, total and sweet.

Complete submission to Jesus Christ. . .

What was going on there? The God he knew, he had now experienced. Reason and power had met together. And that's what the Gospel is – it *is* a theology, but Paul said that it is also the power of God unto salvation. And when people experience that, they are freed from slavery into sonship – sons and daughters of the God most high.

And so my question to you this morning is this: “Is theology and the power of God wedded together in your life?” If not, cry out to God to fill you with His Spirit. Pray that I would always be full of God's Spirit. The most reasonable reasoning will accomplish nothing unless God's Spirit opens people's minds and hearts. But this brings us full circle to where we

started this sermon. We may not stop teaching the whole counsel of God simply because people don't like it and won't receive it. That's like saying, "I better quit aiming my gun at a criminal's heart when he says that he doesn't believe in guns." Paul's methodology of reasonable reasoning is to pull the trigger. And by God's grace some men, women and children will indeed find that theology to be relevant, powerful, life transforming and something to be experienced. By the Spirit they will come to know it not in word only, but also in power. May it be so, Lord Jesus. Amen.