

Church 2.0

*“But 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 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Why Is It So Hard To Be Like The Bereans?

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Acts 17:10-15

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 17:10; that’s on page 926 in your pew Bibles. We’re carrying on with the story of Paul’s second missionary journey and we are going to be looking specifically at Paul’s encounter with the noble and discerning Bereans. The Bereans are often held up as a sort of MODEL for how people should LISTEN to the Word of the Lord, so John Stott for example says here:

“Luke obviously admires their enthusiasm for Paul’s preaching, together with their industry and unprejudiced openness in studying the Scriptures. They combined receptivity with critical questioning.”¹

That’s good listening!

And that’s why we so often name our camps and our publishing houses and even our churches after these Bereans. It is hard to find a large city in North America that doesn’t have at least one Berean Baptist Church in it – we love the Bereans! And if you travel in Christian circles long enough, eventually you’ll hear a sermon or you’ll participate in a Bible Study in which someone will be telling you to BE LIKE THE BEREANS!

¹John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 274.

But how do we DO THAT and WHY is it SO HARD? Those are the big questions that come to mind when we read this story and my plan for today is to address them in reverse order – but let's begin with the text. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 10:

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. 11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. 12 Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. 13 But 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. 14 Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. (Acts 17:10-15 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned, this story is generally held up as an example of how to listen and discern the Word of God. The Bereans were good listeners – way better listeners than the Thessalonians – whom Paul visited just before them – and way better listeners than the Corinthians, whom Paul visits in chapter 18. Good listeners are RARE. They were RARE in Bible times, and I think we would probably all agree that they are even MORE RARE today. So I think it would be helpful for us to begin there. I want to start by asking the question:

Why Is It So Hard For Us To Be Like The Noble Bereans?

I want to move from the general to the specific. In general it is hard to be a good listener – it is hard to be like the noble Bereans:

1. Because the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked

I'm citing there from Jeremiah 17:9:

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV)

There is something wrong with the human heart – the prophet says. We were made to live peacefully and prosperously under the Word of God. We learn that in Genesis. God made human beings to function as a sort of ROYAL CLASS over all creation. We were supposed to be a species of PRIESTS – speaking to God on behalf of creation and to creation on behalf of God. So we were literally MADE FOR THIS – we were created with this capacity in mind – the capacity to HEAR, UNDERSTAND and COMMUNICATE the Word of God.

But something has obviously gone wrong.

In fact in the ESV translation of Jeremiah 17:9 that comes across even clearer. The ESV has it as:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately **sick**; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

I think SICK is probably the better term there because it implies that IF the human heart was healthy again, then we would be able to hear, understand and speak as we were originally created and intended to do. What is sick can be healed – at least in theory.

But that’s the issue – fundamentally – in the Bible. That’s why good listeners are rare. There are very few people in the Bible after Genesis 3 who seem able or inclined to hear and receive the Word of God. The Word of God is GIVEN but the people don’t understand it or they resent it, or they suppress it or they just plain ignore it. Do you remember that time when in King Josiah’s day they literally FOUND a copy of the Law of Moses – we think that is referring to the Book of Deuteronomy – hidden away in a storage closet in the basement of the temple. They had literally LOST a large section of the Bible for multiple generations. That’s how careless they were. That’s how disinterested they were.

They plain and simple – did not want to hear.

That was true then – and that remains true now.

Ever since the fall – where human beings decided that they wanted to determine right and wrong for themselves – ever since then, we haven't been very good at listening. In fact, it would be better to say that we are remarkably skilled at NOT LISTENING. As the Apostle Paul put it, we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). The truth is THERE but we push it BACK and we push it DOWN because we don't want to hear it.

That's the default human condition. We come out of the womb now with a built in expertise at ignoring, distorting and suppressing the Word of God.

That's true for everyone and that's why it has always been hard to be like the noble Bereans. But, as I mentioned, if anything, it is even harder for us in our day and age. Let me walk you through a few reasons for that.

One of the reasons that it is so hard for us is that we don't have a Pope.

2. Because we don't have a Pope

Now I say that somewhat tongue in cheek, but historically speaking it is a real factor. Church historians will tell you that one of the original reasons for having a Bishop and then later a Pope was to protect the church from the danger of false teaching and heresy. It was the Bishop's job to serve as a sort of gatekeeper deciding which ideas and interpretations were out of bounds in terms of the principles and parameters represented in the Scriptures.

Now of course, as we all know, that system, well-meaning as it was, became corrupted and after a while the Pope became a BARRIER to the cause of doctrinal faithfulness as opposed to the GUARDIAN of doctrinal purity and so in the Protestant Reformation, we decided to get rid of him – and to be clear – I am on board with that. I have no interest in trying to bring back the Pope.

But getting rid of the pope means that now our front door is wide open – and through that door blows every wind of strange and stupid – and it's up to us now to sort through the wheat and the chaff.

And that leads to our third problem. It's hard for us to be like the noble Bereans:

3. Because we don't read our Bibles

Look again at Acts 17 verse 11. Luke says:

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” (Acts 17:11 ESV)

So these people were DAILY in the Word!!! This wasn't a once-a-week thing for them – or a once a year thing for them. They people KNEW the Scriptures – so they knew when they were hearing the Word of God and when they were hearing heresy and absolute nonsense.

We've probably all heard the illustration before about how the Treasury people train their agents to spot counterfeit bills.

How do they do it?

By having them study the original!!

If you know what a REAL hundred dollar bill looks like – if you know the colour, the contour, the paint, the texture, the script and the security features like you know the back of your hand then you are going to be able to spot a counterfeit bill from a mile away.

That's the idea – and it works EXACTLY the same way when it comes to hearing and discerning the Word of God. If you know the what the Bible says – then you are going to be able to “test the spirits” as John says. That's 1 John 4:1:

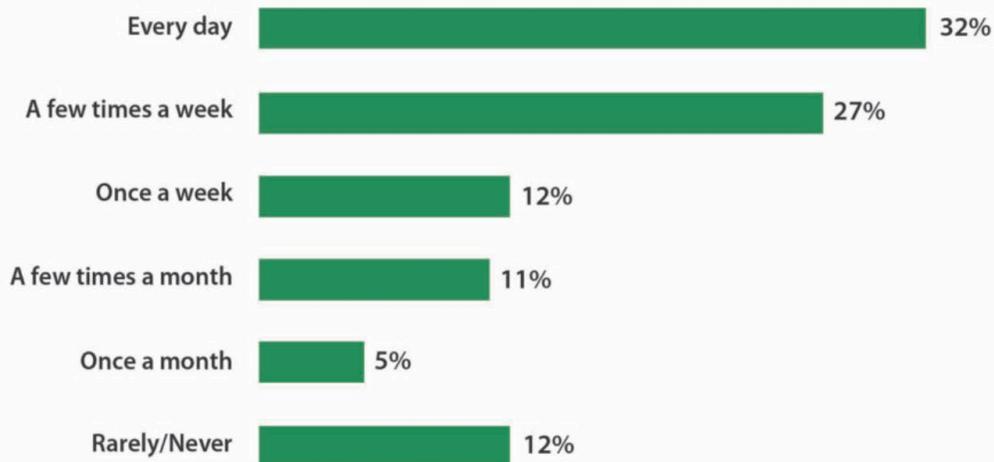
“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1 ESV)

So not everyone who says they are speaking for Jesus IS IN FACT speaking for Jesus – for many false prophets have gone out in to the world – and so the only way you can sort out the wheat from the chaff is to KNOW, KNOW, KNOW, the BIBLE. You have to examine, study and memorize the unchanging Word of God – just like the Bereans do in this story.

And that’s the problem – because Christians in North America, by and large, aren’t doing that. According to a recent Lifeway survey of church going Protestants in North America, only 32% of them are reading their Bibles every day.

How often do you read the Bible?

Among Protestant churchgoers



Note: May not equal 100% due to rounding.



LifeWayResearch.com

To state the obvious if only one third of us are daily studying the Scriptures, then we are not going to be discerning enough as a body to function as Protestant churches were designed to function. In the Protestant system, WE collectively are the Pope. Congregations are responsible for sorting through truth and error; congregations are responsible for hiring and firing their preachers and teachers – that’s literally what it means to be a CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH – it is a terrifying responsibility – and it requires us to READ, STUDY and EXAMINE the Scriptures. You can appoint one person to do that and give him lots of power – that’s the Roman

Catholic model – or we can ALL DO IT together. That’s our model – but we actually have to DO OUR HOMEWORK for that model to work.

The Bereans didn’t have a pope, but they did have Bibles and they were meeting together DAILY – Luke says in verse 11- to read and study them. If we aren’t doing that, then we won’t be able to function like the Bereans did.

Alright, fourthly, it is hard for us to be like the Bereans – to be noble and discerning listeners:

4. Because of the internet

The internet is a game changer, isn’t it? I wonder if the Bereans would even have been like the Bereans if they had had to contend with the internet. The internet provides us with unlimited information with absolutely no curation.

So to provide a comparison, back in the old days when we got our information from the library there were TWO levels of curation. The first level was done by the purchaser. Books are expensive and libraries have budgets so only the BEST, the most TRUSTED, the most REPUTABLE books would be purchased in any given category. The second level of curation was the librarian herself. If you went to a public library and asked for the best books on how to grow tomatoes or how to train your dog, then she would show you the TWO BEST BOOKS on those topics and you would take them home.

That’s CURATION – and there is absolutely nothing like that on the internet. Any wackadoodle can write a blog or an article and if he or she knows anything about Search Engine Optimization – or if he or she is willing to pay a little something something to Google – then that article will be the first article you find regardless of its worth or merit. And so looking for information on the internet is like bobbing for apples in a public toilet. You might come up with something good but the odds are not in your favour.

When I talk to pastors today about the struggles they face, the danger from internet preachers and bloggers is at the very top of the list. See, you listen to your Board approved and accountable preacher for 45 minutes a week. But there are people in this congregation listening to internet

preachers and teacher for 10, 12 or 20 hours a week – and nobody here knows who they are, nobody knows where they came from or whether or not they can be trusted. Churches 30 years ago split when an elder or a pastor started going sideways and took people with him; but now it's like every sideways pastor and elder in the universe is whispering in our people's ears 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

It's a JUNGLE OUT THERE – and the internet has brought all of those dangers into immediate, intimate contact with our people at the touch of a button.

That's a huge factor. It's hard to be a good listener today because there is just so much content and so little mediation and curation.

Which leads to the final factor I want to draw to your attention to here. It is hard to be a Berean today:

5. Because of individualism

These people were listening TOGETHER – did you notice that? They didn't receive Paul's message at home, through the internet, on the ear buds and then look up the passages on their iPhones while taking the subway to work.

That's not what it says. Acts 17:11-12 says:

“**they** received the word with all eagerness, **examining** the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. 12 Many of **them** therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” (Acts 17:11-12 ESV)

Those are all PLURAL terms! This is even clearer in Greek than it is in English. That word “examining” for example is a Nominative PLURAL Masculine participle – meaning in Greek it includes the concept of THEY. It doesn't say that “he or she was examining these things on their own” it say that THEY were examining these things TOGETHER and many of THEM believed.

This was an entirely CORPORATE or BODY or CONGREGATIONAL endeavour.

That's not how we roll anymore as modern day believers is it? We do most of our listening ON OUR OWN. We do most of our thinking on our own – and that's part of the problem. It's hard for us to be like the Bereans because we don't have the same instincts as the Bereans had. When they heard something challenging or convicting their instinct was to COME TOGETHER and to SPEAK TO ONE ANOTHER and to WRESTLE WITH ONE ANOTHER to see if these things were so. Our instinct is to pop the earbuds in and go for a jog in the woods to get some inner clarity. And it is amazing what you'll hear when you are asking questions of no one but yourself. After all – and this brings us back full circle:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

Alright, so that's why it is so hard. That's why there are so few BEREANS in our day and age – as there have been in every day and age. Remember, this was rare. The Bereans stood out even in the Book of Acts as a particularly good and noble example of what it means to hear and discern the Word of God.

So it's a high bar here – but there are resources presented in the Scripture to help us make progress. Let's talk about those.

How can we be more like the Bereans, or more simply, how can we become better listeners? That's the question I want to end with.

How Can We Become Better Listeners?

Given how hard it is to be like the noble Bereans, the first thing we need to do is:

1. Pray for ears to hear

If fallen human beings are bad listeners, and if we are born with a built-in expertise at deflecting and distorting the Word of God then we need HELP! We need grace! We need some kind of Divine Intervention to kick start this process, don't we?

In the Bible, after the fall, there is a sense in which HEARING is a gift. Moses said to the people of Israel near the end of his life:

But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. (Deuteronomy 29:4 ESV)

The Word of God was ALL AROUND the people of Israel in the Old Testament, but most of them did not have ears to hear it. There was a grace they needed that they did not have. But in the person and work of Jesus that GRACE began to be GIVEN. That's why Jesus would often end his sermons by saying:

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Matthew 11:15 ESV)

That's why he would say to his disciples who stuck around afterwards to ask questions:

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.” (Matthew 13:16 ESV)

Hearing is a gift!

Hearing is a grace – and so if you want to hear; if you want to be a good and noble listener like the Bereans, then pray. Ask God today to give you a seeing eye and a hearing ear. Ask him to DIG EARS FOR YOU.

I really do think that is where you have to start. If you are sitting here today because your wife dragged you here or you were promised pie after church – I don't know why you are here – but if you are here and you have always felt like the Word of God was just so much mumbo jumbo – if you've heard a dozen sermons and none of them ever made sense to you – if you always feel like the preacher is talking over your head – no matter how much he tries to bring it down to street level – if that's you today, then I want to challenge you: pray and ask God to open your ears. Because maybe the problem isn't the preacher. Maybe the problem isn't the Bible. Maybe the problem is YOU. Maybe your ear is crusted over. Maybe you have been “suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.”

So pray.

Ask God for a listening ear.

The second thing you need to do is become part of a listening group.

2. Be part of a listening group

That's part of what the church is – the church is MORE than that, but not LESS than that. The church is a listening group and as fallen human beings, who are living in a very individualistic culture, we need that. We need to read the Word of God in a circle – with other people – so that our BIAS is not allowed to overpower the text.

In a sense, joining a group is an act of self-awareness and humility. Do you understand how powerful an influence your inner biases and self-deceptions exert over your hearing and your perceiving?

The English writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley should be given credit for his self-awareness. In his book *Ends and Means*, he said:

"I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption... For myself... the philosophy of meaningless was essentially an instrument of liberation... sexual... [and] political."²

Are you hearing that? Huxley admits that he had MOTIVES for wanting to believe in a world that was not governed over by a moral God. He didn't want to believe in God because if he believed in God he wouldn't be free to do the things he wanted to do and to live the way he wanted to live. His LUSTS and his POLITICAL COMMITMENTS kept him from seeing the world the way it truly was.

² Aldous Huxley, *Ends And Means*, internet citation:
https://www.archive.org/stream/endsandmeans035237mbp/endsandmeans035237mbp_djvu.txt

That is ADMIRABLE self-awareness – now it did not lead Aldous Huxley to join a Small Group – but I hope his example may inspire you to do that. Huxley was aware that his inner presuppositions – the things he believed already BEFORE he opened his eyes and before he opened his ears – were influencing the way he perceived and experienced the world. That’s true for all people – and one way to escape that is by perceiving and experiencing the world in community. Through multiple eyes and through multiple ears.

When you read the Bible as a fallen human being your particular lusts and political commitments will cause you to want to overlook certain passages.

But if you are sitting next to a person with different lusts and different political commitments, then between the two of you, you have a far better chance of seeing what is actually there.

Now I think that is a very strong argument for two things: church membership and small groups.

I think it is an argument for church membership because we all need someone with authority in our lives to point out when we might not be hearing what we should – or when we might be listening to something that we should not be. And that’s what church membership is. Church membership is you GIVING AUTHORITY to the group, exercised by a board that you appoint – so that they can hold you accountable for how you are hearing and responding to the Word of God.

You need that.

Unless your human nature has been less affected by the fall than all the rest of us – then you need that.

And then I think it is also an argument for small groups – for micro community learning experiences. Call them whatever you want. It is helpful to sit in an actual circle or around a table or in a small room with Bibles open on the lap, asking questions, hearing perspectives, interacting, studying, wrestling together in a group. When you do that the weight of personal bias is considerably diminished.

We need that – because of who we are, because of what sin has done to us and because of the particular time and culture that we are living in.

So, pray for ears to hear, join a listening group, and then lastly:

3. Start and end with Holy Scripture

Of course that's the primary lesson that we tend to take away from this passage, and rightly so. Luke tells us:

“they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” (Acts 17:11 ESV)

That's the perfect balance, isn't it? They were open minded, but not so open that their brains fell out. They took everything they heard and they tested it against the prophecies, principles and parameters of Holy Scripture.

That's exactly right!

And that's the PRACTICE that we will need to recommit to if we are to remain a faithful, Gospel preaching, culture reaching church in the years and decades to come. We can't avoid the fact that we live in confusing times. We can't shut out the world. I wish sometimes we could. I confess that I have prayed and asked God to crash the internet – and maybe the entire electrical grid for good measure. It would make pastoring – and parenting – a whole lot easier. But that hasn't happened yet – so for now, we need to get better at discernment. We need to be better at listening to the voice of God among the rush and crash of other voices.

We need to START with the Word of God. We need to read the Bible – before we listen to the news, before we head out the door to school, before we begin talking and listening to our friends and neighbours.

And we need to take everything we HEAR in those various places BACK to the Word of God – as did the Bereans.

We need to begin and end with Holy Scripture because:

“The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.”
(1 Peter 1:24-25 ESV)

Thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.