

16J. J. Finkelstein, "The Bible, Archaeology, and History—Have the Excavations Corroborated Scripture?," *Commentary*, 27, 4, Apr. '59, pp. 341-349.

17Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-21.

18*Ibid.*, p. 16.

19*Ibid.*, p. 19.

20Sir Charles Marston, *The Bible Is True*, (London: 1934), pp. 67ff.

21Sir Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1954, pp. 27-36). Woolley concludes (p. 36), "The Genesis version says that the waters rose to a height of twenty-six feet, which seems to be true (!)."

22Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, pp. 14-18.

23*Ibid.*, p. 15.

24*Loc. cit.*

25Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

26Albright, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 206, 247. Two interesting, readable accounts of ancient Mesopotamia which both acknowledge Abraham as coming from Ur are: Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959) and Walter A. Fairservis, Jr., *Mesopotamia, The Civilization that Rose Out of Clay*, (New York: MacMillan, 1965).

27Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 16. Such parallels have both clarified the problems of Scripture and have raised new problems. For example the problem of the origin of the Flood and Creation stories which are found in Sumerian and Babylonian literature is rather difficult to resolve at present. For an evangelical attempt to resolve the problems see Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, pp. 26ff.

28*Ibid.*, p. 17. See also J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962).

29Heidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-223. Dr. Heidel points out some interesting facts which discredit the theories of Annihilation and Soul Sleep and show them not to have been prevalent in the Hebrew thought or burial practice in contrast to some of her neighbor's practices.

30Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, p. 18.

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## SPIRIT OF BEREANISM

By David L. Weddle

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Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11, ASV)

We have adopted the Bereans because we identify ourselves with rigorous, personal Bible study. They brought Paul's teaching under

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the scrutiny of Scripture, prefiguring the Reformation insistence on the written Word as the ultimate criterion of faith and practice. The Bereans refused to be moved from the solid foundation of the Law of Jehovah on which their faith was grounded. For their faithfulness to the binding authority of revelation and their desire to accept no theology which did not harmonize with their personal Bible study we praise the Bereans and seek to emulate them.

But Bereanism, as a way of life and thought, also contains another element which we have perhaps not been so eager to adopt: a total openness to the possibility of new understanding arising. Not only were the Bereans firmly committed to the Scriptures as the normative statement of their faith, they were also responsive to any new light which might be shed on their interpretation or applications of those scriptures. In this attitude they also share the basic impulse of the Reformers who challenged traditional interpretations of the scriptures as obscure or inaccurate and proclaimed a "renewed" Biblical message, derived from the original texts and shaped by the tools of scholarship developed in the Renaissance. Protestantism owes its existence to the openness of Luther and Calvin to "new light."

Thus Bereanism involves two themes of human experience as old as the pre-Socratic philosophers: the old and the new, the permanent and the changing, the traditional and the revolutionary. The historic task of both philosophy and theology has been to strike the balance between the two. Plato's entire metaphysics is built on the distinction between the empirical world of variety and temporality and the changeless realm of the Ideas, or static forms, apprehended only by intuition. Similarly, the cosmology of Whitehead treats the universe as a dynamic process of "events" which are the actualizations of a set of potentials, called "eternal objects." Yet, while Whitehead locates reality in the world of changing experience, Plato calls the material world of sense experience a "shadow" of the "really real" realm of the Forms. That is to say, Plato has struck the balance between these two factors in favor of permanence, while Whitehead emphasizes the dynamic character of reality.

In terms closer to our everyday experience these two themes which are the genius of Bereanism can be translated as "conservative" and "liberal." The balance one chooses between these two factors determines his choice of career (steady, solid income vs. the risk of commission or investment income), his political position (maintenance of the status quo vs. social-political change), his cultural tastes (Bach vs. Brubeck) and his theology.

The Bereans did not sacrifice one of these elements to the other. They did not deny "development" for the sake of "defending the faith," but neither did they sacrifice "orthodoxy" in the name of "progress." To be a Berean is to be open to the adventure of change and intellectual-spiritual advance; to be a Berean is to recognize the permanent significance of God's Word. God honored such a spirit as "noble" and revealed to those first Bereans the truth of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ.

It is of highest importance for those of us who call ourselves "Bereans" to examine the true spirit of Bereanism which is the recognition that intellectual and spiritual development are companions, not enemies, and that they can together enrich one's basic allegiance to the scriptures. To that end we will deal with the two elements of openness and commitment which comprise the true spirit of Bereanism.

The Bereans had what Luke calls "readiness of mind" and what F. F. Bruce in his commentary terms "commendable open-mindedness." They possessed true intellectual freedom in that they could consider and investigate every candidate to the post of truth without fear because they were related to the basic revelation of truth in the scriptures. To impose limitations on what they could read or to whom they could listen would be to admit that the revelation was in danger from those quarters, that there was some challenge the revelation could not meet or some criticism from which their interpretation could not profit. Such a limitation would replace their courageous freedom with a fearful legalism. But the Bereans were neither provincial nor fearful; they joyfully affirmed their freedom in the truth by being open to any expression of human thought which claimed to enhance their apprehension of the truth.

That the Bereans even received Paul is the chief evidence of their courageous "readiness of mind." They were open to the possibility of truth coming from as unlikely a source as an itinerant preacher, reported to be a political leftist (Acts 17:7), associated with the lowest social-economic classes, presenting a theology of paradox (God-man) and philosophic nonsense (resurrection), and thoroughly denounced by their own religious leaders as a blasphemer and perverter of God's Law. Such a figure would probably be denied admittance to most of our churches, let alone allowed to use the pulpit to express his opinions. Yet free from any prejudice, these noble Bereans gave him audience, refusing to judge until they had heard him for themselves.

If we today would imitate the openness of the first Bereans, to what contemporary sources might we turn for the possibility of new truth arising? To what historical-social-cultural currents in our own time might we look for clues to new understanding of the meaning and application of our faith in Christ? There are many, but I choose five which are of significance to us because as sources of truth they seem as unlikely to most of us as Paul must have to the godly Jews in Berea.

1. The widespread agitation for world peace in the forms of political groups in our own country and the international organizations for peace, including the United Nations.

Lest I be completely misunderstood, I should make it clear that I am not advocating full support of all these five elements. What I am saying is that we must be aware of the contributions they can make and the serious problems they raise in the context of conservative Christianity.

It is imperative that we come to grips with the need for a clear definition of the relation between Christian teaching and the realm



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of political action, especially of a militaristic nature. The naive identification of Christianity with "Americanism" must be abandoned if we would be true to the demands of both. The accusations which John Hospers brings against the usual conservative attitudes in this area are significant:

(Christians) are told to beware of false gods, but they believe in 'America First' and frown on any attempt to alleviate world tensions because the enemy is wicked, communistic, and atheistic besides. Attempts at conciliation they brand 'appeasement'.... These Christians are supposed to believe that it is wrong to kill, yet '...from the time of Constantine to the time of global radiation, Christians have killed Christians and been blessed for doing so by other Christians.<sup>1</sup>

If we heatedly reject protest groups as idiotic, anarchic or cowardly (two out of three *ad hominem*--par for the course in such arguments), what answers are we providing for those who point out that murder is as immoral when done in the name of national interest as when done for personal profit?

2. Civil rights movements and the advocating of social changes, especially for the poor and discriminated.

As James points out in the second chapter of his epistle, it is inconsistent for a man who has faith in the One Who humbled Himself and became of no reputation to hold at the same time that his race is inherently superior to another. The curse of Ham was fulfilled in the occupation and subjection of Canaan by the Israelites several centuries ago. It is sheer vanity which calls upon Genesis nine for support of social-political discrimination today.

The men of our times are not blind fools. They see clearly that Christians who offer their colored brethren money to "build a church in your own neighborhood and attend there" are only "keeping the Negro in his place" under the guise of love. It is to deny this hypocrisy that some contemporary theologians deny the existence of God in any other form than that of love, defined as standing beside your neighbor. And they are being heard in the "inner city," from which most conservatives have retreated to the white suburbs.

Until the church begins to demonstrate its preached convictions that all sinners are equal in condemnation before God and all believers are one in Christ Jesus, its practice will continue to give the lie to its doctrine. And what of us "grace people" whose chief doctrine is the oneness of all men in the Body of Christ, a realm where all distinctions are abolished?

3. Contemporary theology, particularly the areas of neo-orthodoxy and Tillich's rejection of the "God of popular theism."

We do not agree with the neo-orthodox view of revelation, *viz.*, that the Bible "becomes" the Word of God in a personal "encounter." However, we do recognize the importance of this emphasis on personal commitment. The Bible is not a cold cadaver for exegetical analysis; it is the living Word of God, the only vehicle of the Holy Spirit in His life-transforming work. It is not a private garden in which we

may pick our proof texts for a pet doctrinal system. For too many Bereans Bible study means a concordance search for all the verses in the English Bible which support their latest distinction or schema.

When Kierkegaard demands that faith is affirmed only by "passionate inwardness," he is pointing to the heart of our experience with God. Apart from such a heart-attitude, an expectant and obedient spirit, Bible study is nothing but a technical exercise. And if such an "exercise" cannot transform our lives, is it really a study of the Word of God?

A true Berean does not let others think for him or judge for him. He gives audience to all who speak, if perchance by some he may be profited in the life of faith. In that spirit of Bereanism, I offer the suggestion that when Paul Tillich tells us that the "God of popular theism" is inferior to the "God above God," we ought to agree. He is calling for a revision of the inadequate view of God which pictures Him as a benevolent protector of my family, my country and my purse, and which sees prayer as the means of enlisting God's help in the pursuit of my own plans. Such a God is a false idol, a mere caricature of the triune God, Creator of heaven and earth, dwelling in unapproachable light, before Whom we prostrate ourselves in silent adoration of His Transcendent and Mysterious Being. Of course, there is much more in Tillich with which we cannot agree at all; but a true Berean is determined to embrace truth even though it be found in the company of error.

Therefore, while much in contemporary theology does not stand the test of Biblical examination, there is great value in understanding the issues and questions with which it is dealing. Many of these questions have not been adequately treated by orthodox Christian thinkers or are in need of new treatment because of the introduction of new data. In any case, refusal to involve ourselves in contemporary theological ferment is to refuse the possibility of truth arising from new sources. In such a refusal we align ourselves with the Pharisees rather than the Bereans.

4. Contemporary literature, particularly the novel. Twentieth-century literature is permeated with theological significance and cannot be ignored by anyone who seeks to understand the human situation in our time. The existentialist obsession with the individual cast adrift in a sea of meaningless decisions in which traditional values are blasted may seem a little dreary at times, but it describes a condition with which many people can identify. These novelists for the most part reject the transcendent God of the Biblical faith as a source for meaning in life and affirm the experience of this life as a celebration of the flesh.

If our Christian witness is to communicate to the "existentialist" dilemma, it must at least understand it and come to grips with the anguish it involves. Platitudinous and hypocritical Christianity is no help to modern man in his "search for authenticity." The contemporary novelist is calling the church to make good its claims to provide meaning and satisfaction in the modern pluralistic society. The church dare not ignore this call.

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5. Contemporary psychology, providing new awareness of the complexity of human nature, new avenues for the redemptive message, new insights into the plight of man.

It will no longer do to dismiss all emotional illness as "demon possession" and all mental anguish as "lack of faith." Psychiatry is no more an insidious Satanic plot to control our minds than is the printing press. They both can be powerful instruments for the healing power of God. The insights of psychological research are a gift of the Father, but shall we refuse them because they are given through a "secular professor" instead of a "grace preacher?"

These comments have been inadequate to outline all the contributions each of these areas offers the Berean, but I trust they have served to suggest some of the sources which can give the Church insights into the nature of the world and the applications of the gospel to that world. The Church must be open to these insights and needs or it will be viewed by the world as a senile old man, sitting in a corner, fondly reviewing the stories of his past and utterly unable to assume vigorous leadership. To ignore these currents of thought in our time is to become insensitive to the relevant questions of the world to whom we have been sent. Will the symbol of Don Quixote, tilting at windmills because he was too near-sighted to see that they weren't dragons, become that of conservative Christianity in general and of the grace movement in particular? We are in danger of that if we continue to work out answers to questions that no one is asking or to fight battles that have lost their significance.

Can we be truly Berean and refuse to be receptive to new understanding? Can it be that what we contemptuously term "the wisdom of this world" may be the truth of God revealed in a context other than our own which we are too proud or too ignorant to examine honestly? One could not accuse the Bereans of either pride or ignorance when they invited Paul to preach his "new gospel."

But there is another side to Bereanism: it is anchored in the unchanging Word of God as the ultimate test of the value of new insights. It is not a floundering liberalism. While the Christian experience is a "building," a process of construction and development, it is always on the unmovable Foundation (see 1 Cor. 3:10-13).

The Bereans were committed to the basic expression of truth which acted as the interpretation of their experience, *viz.*, the Old Testament. They "examined the scriptures daily." Thus the Bereans struck the balance between the two elements: openness and commitment. They recognized that a house built on sand would fall and that openness without commitment would only lead to scepticism (the path and eventual end of Greek philosophy). While they received Paul's teaching with "all readiness of mind," they "examined the scriptures daily," whether those things were so. The tension then between safety and adventure, dogma and debate, foundation and building, which is characteristic of life, is also characteristic of Bereanism. Bereanism is an attitude of complete openness to "novel advance" in truth which is controlled by the constant expression of truth in the Scriptures.



But we must not be content until we have clarified the nature of this commitment to the Scriptures. When we say "commitment to the Scriptures," we mean, of course, "commitment to our interpretation of the Scriptures." With that important distinction in mind we can say that a true Berean does not view his interpretation as a settled dogma, forever certain in all its details. He does not jealously protect his system as a finished gem but as a stone in need of much polishing; grace theology is not for him a destination, but a journey. Therefore, he does not forcibly squelch live options in doctrinal discussions. He remains open to frequent review and criticism of his creed. Church councils met regularly and Bereanism recognizes that ancient ballots may be contested.

However, the true Berean also knows that the gospel will always be a "scandal:" an offense to the man whose religion must always be rationally acceptable and a stumblingblock to the man who takes pride in his own righteousness. Therefore, he does not submit to the temptation to make the gospel palatable to modern man by denying its Biblical content. The Berean is grounded in the firm belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and in the authority of His Word as the foundation on which our relationship to Him is established and maintained. All fresh insights are judged according to their harmony with that belief; that belief is never altered to fit new insights.

This foundation--Jesus Christ as Lord--is the ultimate test of the quality of all new ideas and practices. For the Berean the crucial question to be raised with regard to a new insight or candidate for truth is: Does it enrich my relationship to Jesus Christ and my witness to the gospel? If it does, it is embraced as a worthy building material.

That is the reason why Bereans embrace dispensationalism; it is a comparatively new insight (in its present form) into truth which exalts the Lordship of Christ and contributes to a more meaningful ministry than certain other forms of traditional doctrine and practice. It is the responsibility of dispensationalists to continue to demonstrate the ability of our approach to enrich Christian understanding and experience. We cannot fulfill that responsibility by confining our attention to a certain set of dated questions.

Bereanism then involves these two elements in balance: an openness to the possibility of new truth and new questions arising in the world; a firm commitment to the Lordship of Christ and a respect for the authority of His "living" Word. We dare not neglect either aspect if we would remain true to the spirit of authentic Bereanism.

\*\*\*\*From a sermon delivered at Berean Bible Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, on January 9, 1966.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Hospers, *Human Conduct: An Introduction to the Problems of Ethics*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), pp. 11,12.