

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)

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March 15, 2020

The Voice of Reason

Acts 13:13-49 (NIV)

13 From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. 14 From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak."

16 Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! 17 The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; 18 for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness; 19 and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. 20 All this took about 450 years.

"After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. 21 Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. 22 After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'

23 "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. 24 Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. 25 As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

26 "Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27 The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. 28 Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

32 *“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors 33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: “‘You are my son; today I have become your father.’*

34 God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, “‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’

35 So it is also stated elsewhere: ‘You will not let your holy one see decay.’

36 “Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

38 “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. 40 Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

41 “‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.’”

42 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. 43 When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.

46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

49 The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! Thank you for being brave! And for joining me in fighting the urge to hug people—even if they really need a hug.

Introduction

You might have noticed the tremendous irony of experiencing the cascading events of the past week while preparing to hear about understanding the role of reason in determining what God is saying to us. I assure you, the irony has not escaped my notice. I do want you to know, however, that I seriously doubt that God planned this pandemic to coincide with my sermon series and particularly with today's message. I don't think that's the way either God or the world that he made works.

Nevertheless, we're here. What once looked like a problem for someone else in some other far-away place has planted itself squarely in the crowded aisles of bare shelves at Dillon's and Hy-Vee and Wal-Mart. The stark reality of an invisible foe with the suddenly familiar name of COVID-19 is upon us, like it or not. We are facing a pandemic that threatens to overwhelm the health care systems, not only of China and Italy, but perhaps of Kansas or even the US. This pandemic has the potential to disrupt the supply chains for commerce and industry on every continent and to wreak havoc upon the global economy. It might even have the power, perhaps, God willing, to bring our president to his knees. Good might yet come of this nightmare. Yet panic and chaos are still probably the greatest dangers that lurk on the horizon.

In the midst of this serious and very real storm, our church leaders—elders and trustees and staff—have been asking, what should we do? How should we respond? What is God trying to say to us? Again—the irony of being in the middle of this sermon series on that very topic is almost comical. Talk about having to practice what you preach!

Well then. We might as well continue, since it appears we are going to have to learn this lesson pretty well if we're going to be followers of Jesus Christ in the midst of this crisis—even if the crisis is fueled in part by overreaction. No matter the cause or contributing factors, we still have to navigate the rapids on this raging river. So we might as well get our bearings while we can.

Let's review briefly the key points so far.

[Slide 2] *Review*

(1) Jesus is the Good Shepherd of God's people. He has ultimate and absolute authority over us, and is the one to whom we look for our guidance on every issue in life.

(2) His word governs and shapes our lives, gives structure and strength to us, and provides the lens by which we understand the world around us and our place in it.

(3) The Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us. He brings the presence of God, leading us into the truth by reminding us of what God has said, illuminating our minds to understand it, and conforming our lives to his truth.

(4) God has offered us his wisdom, which he has deposited for us in his Word and in the gifts he has given to us in the form of people. The collected wisdom of the church gives us a way to evaluate our own impressions of what God might be saying to us by allowing us to compare what we think we are hearing from God with what he has said in the past or in the present to others in whom he also lives.

[Slide 3] *Wesley's Quadrilateral*

These three different means for seeking guidance from God—seeking to know what he has said to us and what he wants us to believe and to do—form three sides of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” The Quadrilateral is simply a representation of four unequal sources of authority that combine to help us determine what God has said and how it applies to us today.

Scripture is the foundation—the only side of the Quadrilateral that represents a unique and absolute, infallible authority. The other three sides are secondary, fallible, but complementary; together they can help us to interpret God’s word and arrive at greater certainty. We’ve discussed the role of experience—our personal encounter with the living God by his Spirit, the kind of knowing that is peculiar to personal relationships. We’ve looked at the role of tradition—the combined wisdom of the church that has been collected for us in various forms, such as written works (like books of theology, history, or Bible commentaries), sermons, or oral instruction from a trusted counselor, Christian leader, or friend. Today we want to examine the fourth side—the role of reason.

[Slide 4] *Defining “Reason”*

It’s always good to define what we’re talking about. Without going wildly into the realm of philosophical analysis, we can say simply that reason refers to the capacity in human beings to think rationally. That is, reason is our capacity to consider and evaluate evidence from our senses, experience, and logic to come to a conclusion that is warranted by that evidence. We take information, combine that with other information, relate the two sets of information, and come up with a conclusion that helps us make sense of the world and of our life.

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Our capacity for reasoning is not universally equal. We each have differing capacities. We are less able to think rationally when we are younger, and become more able as we grow older. Our capacity is affected by our education (formal or

informal) and by our experiences. It can be diminished by injuries or disease (think, Alzheimer's or brain tumors) or limited by conditions that are beyond our control, such as Down's syndrome. It can be affected by our environment or our culture. For instance, the beliefs or elements of traditional knowledge that are passed down among the members of a clan or a tribal society may be in conflict with what can be known through Western scientific analysis or what is taught in Christian faith. Many in the ancient Near East believed that the fertility of one's flocks and herds was the result of the gods having intercourse in the heavens while they had intercourse with the priestess. Or consider the practice of Hindus in India (as recently as the 1980's) that a man's widow is burned alive on his funeral pyre.

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These examples show that our capacity for reasoning is limited; therefore reason is not infallible. It is easily demonstrated that all of us are capable of coming to erroneous conclusions when we try to think rationally. It might be a relatively small error. We might forget to include an important piece of evidence that dramatically affects the conclusion: say, when we're estimating the cost of a small home project. Or it could be a huge error—like building an entire worldview on fallacious assumptions compounded by misinformation and faulty reasoning (such as we find with the Klan or other white supremacist groups).

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The fact that our reasoning is limited and never free from errors means that reason itself can never be an infallible or absolute authority. This is true both in the concrete sense of any particular person's capacity for reasoning, and in the abstract or ideal sense of a perfectly logical rationality that can somehow be imagined, which would be able to arrive at objective, undeniable, and universal truth. This was the crucial error of the Enlightenment—a movement that dominated Europe in the 17th-19th centuries and has negatively impacted the Western world ever since. (We're still paying the price, especially in our universities, for this fundamentally flawed attempt to make human reasoning the ultimate authority. The end of this road leaves us with pointless lives, having reduced all of human experience to meaningless, random biological and chemical processes.)

[Slide 8] *The value of reason*

But even though our capacity for reasoning is not infallible and cannot be an absolute authority, it is still a better vehicle than the alternative for making observations about the world and what is happening in it. It is a better tool for obtaining accurate, reliable knowledge about reality and our place in it, and thus a better means for drawing conclusions and making decisions based on our

knowledge. Without reason, we are left with inexplicable emotional responses and unwarranted supposition, which are horrible guides for life. We meet someone new, for instance, and conclude without any evidence that “*I feel like you’re a trustworthy person.*” Or, “*I think you’re a thief.*” Neither conclusion has any merit. Yet we are committed to that determination—based on what, exactly?? Or perhaps you meet someone who is convinced that the moon landing was faked. Or that the so-called pandemic is really nothing more than an attempt by Trump’s enemies to bring down his administration. Without reason, we are left with absurdity and subject to the whims of whoever shouts the loudest or wields the biggest weapon.

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Reason is God’s gift to us—it is a part of what it means to be created in the image of God. Reason enables us to learn, to acquire genuine knowledge, and to share that knowledge with others. It is God’s gift to us, given in order to equip us to be good stewards of the world he created—to govern ourselves and human society and the planet itself; to live together and mature as a people who understand ourselves to be caretakers of God’s creation and responsible to him for learning how to best care for the people and world he has made so that it and we reflect his goodness and reach his intended end.

It follows, therefore, that learning to listen to reason and learning to listen to the Spirit are not in conflict with one another. They are neither incompatible nor opposites. God always intended for us to learn through encountering him directly and personally, spirit to spirit, while also learning through encountering the world and investigating it with our intellect. The spiritual and cognitive aspects of our being, along with our emotional, physical, and social aspects, were always meant to be joined, not separated or denied.

[Slide 10] *Acts 13*

Our passage today from the book of Acts offers us a wonderful example of the usefulness of reason in spiritual matters. We pick up the story in the midst of Luke’s narrative of what is usually termed “Paul’s first missionary journey.” That title is a common but unfortunate misnomer. For this was not Paul’s first missionary effort in bringing the gospel to Gentiles, as we can deduce from earlier portions of the book of Acts. But it is the first of his missionary efforts after being formally and officially sent out with Barnabas by the church in Antioch.

Chapter thirteen describes the first two segments of this extended effort by Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel to the Gentile world. It begins with the description of how the two apostles were recognized and officially sent out by the church in Syrian Antioch (13:1-3). That is followed by the first segment of their

journey in Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean that is west of Syria and south of what is now Turkey.

We then pick up the story with Paul and Barnabas arriving in Perga, the capital city of the province of Pamphylia, which lies five miles inland and twelve miles east of the port of Attalia (modern Antalya). Luke doesn't tell us anything about the apostles' activity in either Perga or Attalia, other than to note that John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem.

But Luke does tell us at great length and in great detail about Paul's activity and preaching and the mixed reception he had in Antioch of Pisidia, located in central Turkey. Antioch was an important trade center—a prosperous commercial hub on a key trade route through the interior of Anatolia (Turkey). It was also a Roman colony, which meant that there were many retired Roman soldiers who had been given free land and citizenship, which translated to increased wealth and status. And there was a large Jewish population there as well.

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Luke's narrative highlights Paul's interaction with the members of the Jewish synagogue, which shows us the application of our capacity for reason in the process of spiritual ministry—the sharing of the gospel through evangelism and instruction in the things of God.

(1) In verses 14-16 we see reason in Paul's decision to go to the synagogue as his point of contact for sharing the gospel. This was not a happy accident, nor a moment of serendipity, but a strategic step. Starting in the synagogue was the best way to reach both Jews and Gentiles with the gospel. The Jewish community, who would be familiar with the prophetic Scriptures, afforded Paul an audience with whom he could immediately relate. And the presence of Gentile God-fearers, who had chosen to identify with the people of Israel and their God, but who were unsure of their status with this God, gave Paul an audience who were uniquely prepared to hear the good news that God welcomed them as well, and thus were especially receptive to the gospel.

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(2) In verses 17-23, Paul appeals to his audience's own knowledge—their history, another strategic intellectual choice. He cites the evidence of Israel's history, showing the progression from their selection as God's people in the Exodus to the selection of a king, David, and the promise of God that he would send a Savior, the Messiah, who would be a descendant of the great king, David.

By citing this history, Paul establishes a position from which to begin his argument. He puts his audience and himself in the same place, on the same level,

as those who share an understanding of what it means to be God's people, what it means to be the people to whom God has spoken through the prophets, and who share a hope in the fulfillment of the promises he made through those prophets. He shows that he understands how the development of Israel's experience as God's people through their history gave meaning to their existence, and how that historical progression itself had purpose that reflected the goodness of God, how God's promise gave them hope. And now he can share the new information that he has come to tell them—that the promise has been fulfilled. There is new significance to the prophecies: they are not merely old reminders of a long-ago and nearly-forgotten hope. They are alive—for the promise has come true.

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(3) In verses 24-25, Paul appeals to a different kind of evidence—the evidence of known or verifiable information from a recognized authority of recent history. John the Baptist was a well-known and revered figure, whose fame extended to Jewish communities far away from Palestine. His status as a prophet was widely received and well-regarded. So Paul points out that John corroborated Paul's statement that Jesus is the Messiah, having identified one who was to come after him. (Luke has already given ample evidence of this fact to his own readers, so he abbreviated his report of Paul's speech here, which would surely have included a clear description of what John said about Jesus as the one who would baptize with the Spirit, the Messiah upon whom the Spirit rested in fulness.)

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(4) In verses 26-29, Paul explains the reason for Jesus' death on the cross. He explains how it happened (the events), and the steps that led to the outcome. His purpose in detailing these events is threefold, and again, his moves are clearly calculated and strategic.

First, he appeals directly to the source of authority that his audience most highly values and accepts—the prophetic Scriptures. Paul demonstrates how the Scriptures themselves pointed to the events of the crucifixion. In doing so, he is depending upon his audience's familiarity with the concept he is assuming, that the Scriptures include predictions of the future. Those predictions, he claims, explain why this horrific event happened: God had foretold them, and they were fulfilled by men who were ignorant of the significance of what they were doing.

Second, he offers his audience a reasonable, intellectual explanation for the truth of what was an emotionally unacceptable assertion—the scandal of the cross. The notion that God's Messiah would die on a cross was something that was so repulsive and offensive it could only be considered blasphemous—except that the

Scriptures predicted it. Paul's explanation gave his audience a way to overcome their deep and powerful emotion through reason.

Third, Paul gave his audience an adequate and authoritative warrant for their faith. He did not ask them to blindly accept his assertions that Jesus was the Messiah. Instead he gave them a basis—the word of God—and an explanation that correlated their authoritative Scriptures with the events and showed how to reconcile the two sets of information. Again, Luke has abbreviated Paul's message; Paul would have pointed to numerous Scriptures that supported his claim (as Luke has shown in his gospel and the first part of Acts).

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(5) Paul (and Luke!) repeatedly appeals to his audience's shared belief in the authoritative and infallible truth of Scripture. We see this over and over in the passage. Eight times Paul cites the Old Testament in support of his claims (13:22, 27, 29, 33-35, 40, 47). He shows how they predicted the events of Jesus' death and his resurrection and thus were fulfilled by the things he describes. Paul is able to tie together the predictions and the events in a way that shows the significance of both the Old Testament prophecies and the events that fulfilled them; he correlates the predictive Scriptures and the reality of the world in which they live.

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(6) In verses 30-31, Paul appeals to another kind of evidence—the testimony of eyewitnesses who are able to corroborate what he has told his audience. He points out that Jesus appeared to multiple witnesses. The multiplicity of appearances gives greater credence to the reports of Jesus' resurrection. And the confirmation by multiple sources adds to the certainty that what was reported was factual, not fictional. Furthermore, Paul notes the continuity of the train of evidence. The same people who witnessed the resurrection were now telling the story (including Paul himself).

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(7) Finally, in his concluding remarks and subsequent warnings to the Jews on a second occasion a week later, Paul reasons from cause to effect, showing the consequences of possible actions or inaction on the part of his audience. He points out the possibility of being forgiven and justified before God, contrasted with the possibility of being excluded from God's kingdom and forfeiting the gift of eternal life. And once again, he ties his reasoning to the predictions of the Scriptures that warn of the consequences of refusing to heed God's prophets and of the necessity of fulfilling the call of God to extend his offer of salvation to the Gentiles.

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Although I can't spend a lot more time on this last point, I do have to mention one more thing as well. Luke, as the author of the book of Acts, also demonstrates the importance of using reason in conjunction with the power of the Spirit in how he has constructed his narrative. This passage is extremely significant in Acts. It is a crucial part of a larger narrative plan that introduces Paul and defends his reputation as an apostle bringing a true message of salvation who is innocent of the outrageous charges brought against him by members of the Jewish community. It is also the first of three similar passages that show why it is that Paul turned to the Gentiles after being rejected by the Jewish people, something that is especially significant in Luke's narrative. And throughout his two-volume work, Luke employs an amazingly intricate narrative plan of repetition, thematic and character development, patterning, prophecy and fulfillment, and appeals to the Old Testament, all of which is designed to support his purpose in writing. He presents an abundance of evidence to show how his audience should interpret the events and the message concerning Jesus and Paul, and to counter the false accusations against them from the Jewish community.

[Slide 19] *Using reason in seeking God's guidance*

All of this is fascinating in itself. But what we want to see here is that when we are trying to hear from God; when we are seeking guidance from God, what to believe, what he expects; we must understand that using our minds, *using reason*, is an essential part of the equation. We can't use reason without the other parts of the equation, the other sides to the Quadrilateral—the foundation of God's word, personal experience of God, and the tradition of the church. And we can't assume that our own thinking, our own understanding, is all we need—remember, our ability to reason is not infallible.

But we need to learn to consider the evidence. God is not afraid of evidence, and we should not be either. What we need, though, is to consider all the evidence, including spiritual perception and personal experience (neither of which is easy to measure), and use our reasoning to come to a conclusion that is warranted by all of the evidence, not just the evidence we happen to like the most.

I don't mind when people say, "*I have trouble believing the Bible*," or, "*I have trouble believing in God*." I understand being in that position. But what I find troubling and very disturbing is people who won't consider the evidence. It's easy to hide behind personal impressions and individual biases or someone else's points in an argument. But what about facing the evidence for yourself?

Christian faith is neither blind nor irrational. Christian faith has a warrant for its claim to be true. It is based on reasonable conclusions from the evidence of

Scripture, history, the testimony of reliable witnesses, the experience of others, scientific analysis of creation, and it is informed and confirmed by personal experience of the reality of God through encountering the Risen Christ through the Spirit of God.

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Next week we'll talk some more about how to put these four parts together—with some practical tips for how to seek God's guidance in a healthy way.

Transition to close

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