

## DID THE NOBLE-MINDED BEREANS BELIEVE IN THE BIBLE ALONE?

By Steve Ray

A prominent anti-Catholic organization out of Oregon, with Dave Hunt at the helm, publishes a monthly newsletter entitled “The Berean Call.” The title is taken from Acts 17 where Paul refers to the Bereans in Asia Minor as "noble-minded," and Dave Hunt chose the title to promote his belief in *sola Scriptura*. *Sola Scriptura*, or the "Bible only," is a Protestant doctrine developed (or invented) in the fifteenth century, which says that the Bible is the sole source of revelation and is the only and final judge in all matters of the Christian faith. It was developed by Martin Luther as a reaction to the historic teachings of the Catholic Church and the Church Fathers of the first centuries. Luther rejected the authority of the Church and the apostolic tradition, and in doing was left with *sola Scriptura* — the Bible alone.<sup>1</sup>

Dave Hunt has actually turned the episode in Berea on its head, since the noble-minded Bereans actually condemn his *sola Scriptura* position. This passage has been turned on its head by Fundamentalists for too long, and it is high time that Catholics reclaim the passage for themselves. Many Catholics have been troubled by this text and explanations from a Catholic perspective have been mediocre at best. But, not only can this biblical text be easily explained by Catholics, it is actually a very strong argument against *sola Scriptura*, and a convincing defense for the teaching of the Catholic Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting from the verses on the Bereans, anti-Catholic author James G. McCarthy writes, "*Scripture is the only infallible interpreter of Scripture*" (*The Gospel According to Rome* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publ., 1995], 308). What he seems to forget is that it is Paul and the Bereans who are interpreting the Scripture. What they are interpreting is also Paul's oral teaching, considering his tradition what it is, the word of God.

We are told that the Bereans were more noble-minded (open-minded, better disposed, fair-minded)<sup>2</sup>. But an important question must first be answered: the Bereans were more noble-minded than who? The Thessalonians! It is very convenient for Fundamentalists to pull this passage out of its context and force it to stand alone. In so doing their case seems convincing, but the context tells us the real story. Before we look at the Bereans, let's take a look at those they are compared to, the Thessalonians. What did the Thessalonians do that made them less noble-minded?

Let's take a look at Acts 17:1-9.

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas; as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brethren

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<sup>2</sup> "Noble-minded, open-minded; these were more open-minded than those in Th. Ac 17:11" (William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, 2nd ed., rev. and augmented [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 319).

"Thus the Jews of Berea 'were more noble [in character] than those of Thessalonica' in their welcome and cordial treatment of the apostles" (Celas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1994], vol. 2, pg. 94).

"A willingness to learn and evaluate something fairly — 'willingness to learn, to be open-minded, to be noble-minded; 'the people there were more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica' Ac 17.11" (*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* ed. by Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida [New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989], no. 27.48).

"Originally refers to nobility of birth, it came to denote those qualities which were expected in people so born, in the same way as Eng. 'noble'. Moffet renders 'more amenable', LC (better) 'more generous', . . . It is the equivalent of Lat. *generosus*, 'noble', 'liberal', 'free from prejudice'" (F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975], 238).

before the city authorities, crying, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this. And when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go."

The Thessalonians rejected Paul and his message, and after denouncing him, they became jealous that some believed, and they treated Paul with contempt and violence — they threw him ignominiously out of town. Why? "For three weeks he [Paul] reasoned with them from the scriptures" in the synagogue as was his custom. They did not revile Paul the first week, or the second, rather, they listened and discussed, but ultimately they rejected what he had to say. They obviously had listened, compared it to the Old Testament scriptures, and then decided that Paul was wrong. We must remember that there were many proclaiming a wide variety of new teachings, supposedly based on the Scriptures and revelations from God. Heresies, cults, and sects were as numerous in the Roman empire as they are today. It would seem the Jews in Thessalonica had a right to be skeptical.

Let's look at Luke's comment about the noble-minded Bereans:

"The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Beroea; and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. <sup>12</sup> Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men" (Acts 17:10–12).

First, we must realize that when Protestants use this passage as a proof text for the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, they should realize that those in question were not Christians; they were Hellenistic Jews. There was no doctrine of *sola Scriptura* within the Jewish communities,<sup>3</sup> but the Scriptures were held in sacred regard. Also, the Jews had no reason to accept Paul's teaching as "divinely inspired" since they had just met him. When new teachings sprang up that claimed be Jewish, or a development of Judaism, the rabbis would research to see if it could be verified from the Torah.

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<sup>3</sup> Although they are frequently referred to as the "people of the book" in reality the Jews had a strong unwritten tradition that accompanied their scriptures, along with an authoritative teaching authority as represented by the "seat of Moses" in the synagogues (Mt 23:2).

If one of the two groups of Jews could possibly be tagged as believers in *sola Scriptura*, who would it be, the Thessalonians or the Bereans? The Thessalonians, of course. They also, like the Bereans, examined the Scriptures with Paul in the synagogue, yet they rejected his teaching. They did not accept the new teaching, deciding after three weeks of deliberation that Paul's word contradicted the Torah.<sup>4</sup> When some of the Greeks and prominent citizens did believe, the Jews became jealous, and rightfully so, from their perspective, since the believers separated themselves from the synagogue and began

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<sup>4</sup> The Jews were rejecting the message of Paul based on their understanding of the Old Testament. It was not completely unjustified looking at it from their Scriptural perspective. How could the Messiah of God be cursed by hanging on a tree like a common criminal, publicly displayed as one who bore the judgment of God? What kind of king and Messiah would that be? This was a seeming irreconcilable situation to the Jews and they rejected Paul's teaching on the Messiah because of their interpretation of the Torah. *"In his presentations, Paul discusses three facts: the Christ had to suffer, he had to rise from the dead, and he is Jesus proclaimed by Paul. The Jews objected to the teaching that Christ died on the Cross, because to them a criminal hanging on a tree (cross) was under God's curse (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13).* (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990], 614).

According to Richard N. Longenecker, *"For Jews, the proclamation of a crucified Messiah was scandalous (cf. 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 5:15), a "blasphemous contradiction in terms (Bruce, Galatians, 166). Undoubtedly the central problem for all Jewish Christians was how to understand Jesus as God's Messiah and yet as cursed by God, with the magnitude of the problem only heightened by the pronouncement of Deut 21:23"* (*Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990], 41:122).

meeting elsewhere apart from the synagogue — at Jason's house.<sup>5</sup> If anyone could be classified as adherents to *sola Scriptura* it was the Thessalonians, who were less noble-minded from Luke's perspective. They reasoned from the Scriptures alone and concluded Paul's new teaching was "unbiblical."

The Bereans, on the other hand, were not adherents of *sola Scriptura* for they were willing to accept Paul's new oral teaching as the word of God (as Paul claimed his very oral teaching was).<sup>6</sup> The Bereans, before accepting the oral word of God from Paul, a tradition as even Paul himself refers to it,<sup>7</sup> examined the Scriptures to see if these things were so. They did so for it was their common ground with the Christian, Paul. They

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<sup>5</sup> The Jews had the Scriptures and they considered themselves the authoritative interpreters of the Torah. The Gentiles were leaving the synagogue to follow Paul. Who were the Gentiles to interpret Scripture and decide important theological issues and accept additional revelation? They were the dogs, not the chosen custodians of the oracles of God? William Barclay writes, "*As usual Paul began his work in the synagogue. His great success was not so much among the Jews as among the Gentiles attached to the synagogue. This infuriated the Jews for they looked on these Gentiles as their natural preserves and here was Paul stealing them before their eyes*" (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976], 128).

*"Paul's successful drawing away of the Gentiles roused the envy of the Jews. The Gentiles were potential converts to Judaism, but Paul had proved more effective than the synagogue in persuading them to take the step of full commitment. Many Gentiles who were attracted by the more spiritual aspects of Judaism were unwilling to take the step of circumcision and were content to remain as God-fearers. So the Jews resolved on action"* (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981], 5:278).

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thes 2:13: "*And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*"

<sup>7</sup> 2 Thes 2:15: "*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.*"

2 Thes 3:6: "*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.*"

1 Cor 11:2: "*I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.*"

were noble-minded precisely because they "received the word with all eagerness."<sup>8</sup> Were the Bereans commended primarily for searching the Scriptures? No. Their open-minded willingness to listen was the *primary* reason they are referred to as noble-minded  not that they searched the Scriptures. A perusal of grammars and commentaries make it clear they were "noble-minded" not for studying Scripture, but for treating Paul better, more civilly than the Thessalonians — with an open mind and generous courtesy.<sup>9</sup> They were noble-minded for they were eager and warmly greeted Paul; the Thessalonians were not noble-minded for they abused Paul in an egregious manner.<sup>10</sup>

But what were the Bereans doing when they listened to Paul? They were examining the Scriptures because the Old Testament Scriptures were the only point of common ground between the Christians and the Jews. Paul often related to the Greeks by quoting from their philosophers (Acts 17:22 ff.), using the source of authority the Greeks understood, were familiar with, and respected. The Jews in Berea and Paul the Christian claimed the Old Testament in common, and it was upon this common ground that they reasoned.

The Bereans were eager to accept words of God from the mouth of Paul, *in addition to* what they already held to be Scripture, that is the Law and the Prophets. Even if one says that Paul preached the Gospel and not a "tradition" it is clear that the Bereans were accepting new revelation that was not contained in their scriptures. This was definitely a new teaching. These Berean Jews were actually accepting oral teaching, the tradition of the apostles, to be equal to Scripture — the actual word of God — in addition to, and an "extension" of, the Torah. This is further illustrated by the reception of Paul's

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<sup>8</sup> "[Eagerness defined as] willingness, readiness, good will; Ac 17:11 here with emphasis on goodwill and absence of prejudice" (*A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. -2nd ed., rev. and augmented [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], defining **proqumiva**).

<sup>9</sup> "The account of Paul's reception at Berea is the classical description of a more well-disposed and open-minded response by the Jews to the Gospel. They were zealous to hear what Paul had to say, and so they met with him daily (and not merely on the Sabbath)" ( Marshall, 5:280).

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce writes, "For, with commendable open-mindedness, they brought the claims made by Paul to the touchstone of Holy Writ instead of giving way to jealousy" (*The Book of the Acts in the New International Commentary on the New Testament* series [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1984], 347).

epistles as divinely inspired scripture (see 2 Peter 3:16)<sup>11</sup> when the Jews had no reason to believe God would provide further revelation in addition to the Old Testament, which is exactly what the New Testament is.<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of anti-Catholics, the *Thessalonians* would have been more noble-minded for they loyally stuck to their canon of Scripture *alone* and rejected any additional binding authority (spoken or written) claiming to be infallible truth from the mouth of a Christian apostle.

Why did the Bereans search the Scriptures? Because it was the *sole* source of revelation and authority? No,<sup>13</sup> but to see if Paul was in line with what they already knew — to confirm additional revelation.<sup>14</sup> They could not submit to his apostolic teaching and oral tradition blindly. But, once they *did* accept the credibility and truth of Paul's words as the oral and spoken word of God, they put such on a par with Scripture and recognized its binding authority! After this point, like the converts who believed in

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Peter 3:15-16: *"So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures."* Here Peter seems to acknowledge Paul's writings as equal to the "other scriptures" which can be presumed to refer to the Old Testament. New revelation was added to previously revealed scripture.

<sup>12</sup> At the "Council" of Jamnia in about 90 A.D. the Jews determined that anything written after Ezra was not infallible scripture. They also commented that the gospels concerning Christ were not inspired nor canonical. We do not know much about the deliberations at Jamnia, but we do know that they mentioned the Gospels of the New Testament. They specifically mentioned them in order to specifically reject them. F. F. Bruce writes, *"Some disputants also asked whether the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sira (Ecclesiasticus), and the gilyonim (Aramaic Gospel writings) and other books of the minim (heretics, including Jewish Christians), should be admitted, but here the answer was uncompromisingly negative"* (*The Books and the Parchments* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984], 88).

<sup>13</sup> The Jews always had a strong oral tradition and the teaching authority passed down from Moses.

<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that Paul did not *just* teach the Old Testament. He clearly sees himself as the presenter of new revelation. An example is Ephesians 3:1–5: *"For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles — assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit."*

Thessalonica, they espoused the apostolic tradition and the Old Testament equally as God's word.<sup>15</sup> Therefore they accepted the apostolic authority and the councils, which means that the determinations of Peter in the first Church Council in Acts 15 would have been binding on these new Gentile converts. The Jews of Thessalonica would have condemned Peter's biblical exegesis at the Church Council in no uncertain terms. They would have scoffed at the Church having authority over them — the Torah was all they needed. However, there is no question that Paul's words, and those of the Church council were morally binding on the new believers and they accepted it as such.

Those who held to *sola Scriptura* rejected Paul because Paul claimed to be the voice of "additional revelation" (something the Church has never claimed for herself, since public revelation ended with the death of the last apostle);<sup>16</sup> those who were willing to accept the apostolic tradition as binding were more noble-minded. Is this passage a proof text for those who espouse *sola Scriptura*? Hardly, in fact this biblical text proves too much for anyone adhering to *sola Scriptura*. Anti-Catholics love to associate themselves with the Bereans, but the Bereans actually condemn them. So, the Thessalonian Jews were rebuked by Luke in his praise of the Bereans, but the praise for the Bereans falls far short of application to Fundamentalist Protestants. Fundamentalists fall into the category of those less noble-minded, those who held to a form of *sola Scriptura* and rejected the oral word of God contained in the apostolic tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

To be consistent with his novel theology of *sola Scriptura*, Dave Hunt really ought to rename his monthly newsletter. Let me suggest a new title: *The Thessalonian Call*.

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<sup>15</sup> 2 Thes 2:15: "*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.*" Paul's spoken words ("taught") were equal to his written epistles. The "us" refers not only to Paul, but also to Silvanus and Timothy (2 Thes 1:1).

2 Thes 3:6: "*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.*"

1 Cor 11:2: "*I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.*"

<sup>16</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting *Dei Verbum*, says, "The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (CCC 66). Public revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle.