

Biblical Open-Mindedness

In Acts 17:11 we find that God, through our inspired first-century brother, Luke, commended the Berean Jews who were "more fair-minded than" the Thessalonian Jews because "they received the Word with all readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether the" things they heard from Paul were true.

Let's approach this notable verse by discussing three things about open-mindedness:

- **What it does not mean to be open-minded**
- **What it means to be closed-minded**
- **What it means to be open-minded**

However, before we actually examine Acts 17:11 and its context (verses 1-14),...

Let's consider the first point: What it does not mean to be open-minded.

Being open-minded doesn't mean being gullible. What I mean is that there are many people (especially in our day of "toleration" and "political correctness") who think they're just being so wonderfully open-minded if they "live and let live." They think that every opinion or statement has validity, and they never criticize anyone for fear of appearing or being legalistic. This is the type of person who's susceptible to accepting whatever he reads or hears at face value. This leads to the next idea, namely that...

Being open-minded doesn't deny that truth is absolute. In our humanistic society, it's very popular to affirm that truth is determined by each individual in response to his own particular situation; in philosophy this doctrine is called "moral relativism" or "situation ethics." This is a false belief system because it's contrary to the words of the Lord who said, "'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (John 8:32). In this verse, Jesus taught that...

- **There is such a thing as truth.**
- **People can know that truth.**
- **They can know that they know it.**

Where's absolute truth found? Jesus answered that question when He prayed to His Father, saying, "'Sanctify [My disciples] by Your truth—Your Word is truth'" (John 17:17). In other words, the absolute truth that people can discover and know is that which is found in the Bible, the verbally inspired Word of God. So since whatever the Bible teaches is truth, then whatever disagrees with it is false!

Being open-minded doesn't necessitate a refusal to condemn false teaching. When false doctrine is taught (especially when it's a salvation issue), we're duty bound before God "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Sometimes when a brother, even in a loving manner, rebukes another brother who is teaching false doctrine, he's accused of not being open-minded; but such is simply a false charge!

Let's consider what it means to be closed-minded.

Webster says that to be closed-minded is "to be stubbornly resistant." So from the reactions of most of the Thessalonian Jews to the Gospel in Acts chapter 17, we can see that there are at least three characteristics of closed-minded people.

To be closed-minded is to be irrational. In Acts 17 we find Paul and his companions in the midst of their second missionary journey, and as was his custom (Jew first, then Greek, Romans 1:16), he went to the Jewish synagogue to begin his evangelism of Thessalonica. When you think about it, this would've been a logical custom, because that's where he'd find his countrymen who already accepted the Old Testament and its Messianic prophecies as the inspired Word of God. So it stood to reason that they would, therefore, be (you'd think) the easiest to convince that Jesus of Nazareth was that

Messiah. Anyway, in preaching the Gospel to these Jews for three weeks, Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, saying, 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ'" (Acts 17:2-3).

Besides proving to them from the Scriptures that Jesus was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies, he also confirmed his preaching with miracles: in First Thessalonians 1:5 he wrote, "Our Gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power." And despite all of Paul's logical argumentation from the Old Testament supported by miracles, most of the Thessalonian Jews (like the Judean Jews) sadly refused to believe.

These men proved themselves to be closed-minded, being downright obstinate and stubbornly resistant toward what Paul had proven to be true. This is the epitome of being irrational; only irrational people reject what has been established as true based on the evidence! So to resist and/or reject that which the evidence substantiates is to be unreasonable and irrational.

To be closed-minded is to be anti-biblical. Taking the last point a step further, those who are closed-minded have no use for the truth; in other words, since the Bible is truth, they have no use for the Bible, regardless of what they might say. Let's take these Thessalonian Jews for an example: no matter how loudly they may have claimed to believe in the Old Testament prophecies, their actions demonstrated otherwise. Why? Because if they had really believed in them, they would've accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

Although they may not come out and say it or even actually realize it, closed-minded people have the attitude which says, "My mind is made up, so don't confuse me with the facts." Notice I said, "although they may not realize it"; I said that because what's really sad is that if you ask folks like them if they think they're being closed-minded, there's very little doubt that they'd say, "No, I'm not being closed-minded." I bring this up because I find this among our own brethren concerning traditional beliefs of the church: "This is what I was taught and what nearly everyone I know of in the church believes." To this I say, "So what? Are we like the Catholics who believe in inspired church tradition after the apostles?"

Closed-mindedness breeds hostility. This is clearly demonstrated in the actions of the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica. Luke stated that they became envious, gathered a mob of evil men, and attacked the house of a man named Jason who was believed to have harbored Paul and Silas (verse 5). Not finding them at Jason's house, they seized Jason and some of Paul's brethren, dragged them before the rulers of the city and making the following false and unsubstantiated charges: "'Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus'" (verses 6-7).

There was no evidence provided that Jason sheltered either Paul or Silas; there was no evidence provided that either Paul or Silas had preached that Jesus was a political rival to Caesar; and there was no evidence provided that Jason was even a Christian! At best they were simply mistaken; at worst it was an outright lie! But they didn't stop to determine what the facts were, for neither the evidence nor the truth matters to a closed-minded and religiously humiliated mob; they will be right at all costs, stopping at nothing to discredit or even physically harm those who oppose them! In fact, when these unbelieving Thessalonian Jews heard that Paul had been successful in making converts *fifty miles away* in Berea, guess what they did! They followed him there in order to make trouble for him (verse 13).

Another example of this sort of mentality is found in Acts chapter 7 when a Jewish mob stoned Stephen to death simply because he preached the truth, which reminds me of Paul's question to the Galatians in 4:16: "Have I become your enemy because I tell you the truth?" Finally...

Let's consider what it means to be open-minded.

After secretly leaving Thessalonica by night, Paul and Silas traveled to Berea. Once again they began their ministry in the Jewish synagogue (verse 10), but, surprisingly, they received a much better reception from the Jews there than they had at Thessalonica. In verses 11-12 we read, "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica in that they received the Word with all readiness and

searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of [the Jews] believed and also a few of the Greeks."

Here, the Holy Spirit, through Luke, commended these Berean Jews for being "fair-minded." This term is translated from a Greek word which literally means to be "noble-minded": the NRSV translates it as "receptive"; a version called God's Word translates it as "open-minded"; and the NIV uses the phrase "noble character" to describe them. These versions indicate that these Berean Jews were of a better character and more open-minded than their Thessalonian brethren. From Acts 17:11-12 we can learn three things about what it means to be open-minded in a manner acceptable to God.

Open-minded people give those with a differing belief a fair and honest hearing. The Berean Jews were commended by God as being "noble-minded" *because* "they received the Word with all readiness." In other words, they were willing to listen to what Paul had to say objectively and fairly, although they, no doubt, disagreed with him at first. The thing is, they didn't just dismiss Paul in an unruly manner because they initially disagreed (see Matthew 7:12).

Too often, most of us, being human, like to talk more than we like to listen; because of this tendency, Jesus often told His audiences, "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear." You know, all of us must admit (if we aren't blatantly arrogant or dishonest) that we just don't know it all, even about the most elementary of Bible doctrines. And since that's the case, all of us must also admit that it's at least possible that we might be wrong and the person with whom we disagree might be right. For example...

It isn't closed-minded for me to affirm that supernatural gifts ceased nearly 2000 years ago when all prophecy was fulfilled; I believe this because everything I've ever studied on this topic in the Bible irresistibly leads me to that conclusion, and I've never seen or heard an argument refuting it. In other words, I'm convinced of that belief. But suppose someone who is convinced otherwise tells me he has found biblical evidence that proves me wrong. Would or would it not be closed-minded of me to just dismiss him without an impartial hearing of his evidence? Of course it would. See, if I did that, I'd be no better than those infidelic Thessalonian Jews. We should sincerely want to be like the Bereans who God commended for their open-mindedness, because they were willing to listen to Paul objectively.

Open-minded people weigh beliefs and evidence presented by others in the light of the Scriptures. The Bereans were called "noble-minded" not just because they listened to Paul impartially, but also because they "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." I said earlier that it isn't being biblically open-minded to gullibly accept anything someone says, and that's a rule the Bereans followed: they didn't accept the Gospel just because *the apostle Paul* preached it or even because *he confirmed it with miracles*; rather, they weighed his arguments in the balance of the Scriptures and found them to be indisputable. So...

Never should we accept something as a religious truth just because some scholar or theologian says it's so; rather, like the Bereans, we should accept something as a spiritual truth only after a *careful* and *open-minded* consideration of what the Bible actually teaches, for, until then, whatever we believe is merely a preconceived idea. Then, if what the person taught corresponds to what God's Word does indeed teach, we should, of course, for our eternal benefit (and maybe even the benefit of others) accept and comply with it as truth. On the other hand, it's obvious that if we don't find it to be true, then, and only then, we should reject it as error *and* lovingly correct him who is teaching the error, especially when he indicates that he doesn't want to teach error, maybe even asking us to correct him.

Open-minded (intellectually humble) people admit when they've been wrong and make the necessary changes. The Berean Jews and Greeks who accepted the Gospel had to admit that their former religions (Judaism and paganism) had been wrong; even though they had to drastically change what they believed and practiced both personally and religiously, making tremendous sacrifices, they were willing to do so. Open-minded people value truth above everything else, and when they discover it, they do as Solomon said: they "buy the truth and don't sell it" (Proverbs 23:23). It isn't easy to admit when we're wrong, but those who are open-minded are willing to do so when the evidence demands it, even as many of the Bereans did. Someone rightly noted that "*Only fools and dead people never change their minds.*"

Let's conclude with some of Jesus' words about open-mindedness.

In His parable about the man who sowed seed, Jesus said that some of the seed "fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty" (Matthew 13:8). Later, while explaining the parable to His disciples, the Lord told what He meant by "good ground": In Luke's account He characterized the "good ground" as those who have a "noble and good heart" (8:15); in Matthew's account He characterized the "good ground" as those who "listen to and understand" God's Word (13:23); and in Mark's account He characterized the "good ground" as those who "accept" God's Word (Mark 4:20). Putting these verses all together, we have this: an open-minded person is one who has a good and honest heart that listens to, understands, and accepts God's Word.

For a Bible book practically devoted to open-mindedness, read Proverbs (one chapter a day per month); and for a great example of open-mindedness, see how Apollos reacted in Acts 18:24-26 (especially with a woman involved).

[Tony E. Denton, January 2005. ASiteForTheLord.com]