

Apologetics & Reason

Heavenly Father, we worship You together. We love You and we acknowledge that we do not love You as we should. But, Father, You have put in our hearts the desire to follow You, to serve You, to love You, to walk in Your ways, to serve Your people, and to go out into the world with Your truth. That is why we are here. And so we pray, Father, that You will teach us in this time. Open our hearts and minds to Yourself that we may be persuaded by the work of Your Spirit in our hearts and by the clarity of Your Word. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The principle we were talking about in our last session is the principle of the adaptation of language to the minds and understanding of the hearers. It is simply the issue of translation. If you were to go to some other part of the world, you would not expect the people there to learn your language. You would know that you had an obligation to learn their language in order to communicate the Gospel to them in the language of their heart. That is the same issue living in this culture today. We are called to learn the language of the heart of the people around us and communicate the Gospel in that language.

I want to start today by looking at one final example of this very creative and very careful use of language in the New Testament. In Michael Green's book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, he talks about John's careful use of language all the way through his Gospel. In John 1:1-18—what is often called the prologue of John's Gospel—John is introducing the Gospel of Christ with these very well-known words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." Then verse 18 says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." If you think about Greek readers of this passage, any Greek who was at all acquainted with the history of thought of his own culture would have immediately had all sorts of bells ringing in his mind as he started reading John 1. The term that John uses, *logos*, has a long history going back to at least the time of Heraclitus, a thousand years before the period in which the New Testament was written. It has a long history in Greek thought. By the time of the New Testament, it is a word that has been used in the whole platonic tradition extensively. It is used in Neo-Platonism. We find it, for example, in the writings of a Jew named Philo coming from the first century. It is also a term that is thoroughly familiar to the Stoics, some of the people with whom Paul was talking in Athens recorded for us in Acts 17.

For many of these Greeks, the term *logos* carried with it the notion of the divine principle of reason or order that stands behind this visible world. There is the divine *logos*, the principle of reason and order, which stands behind the physical world, that we can see and touch. It is far above this world. The Stoics and others, too, also thought that this divine principle of *logos* expressed itself particularly in the human mind, in our human rationality. It was as if human beings were related to or a part of that divine and eternal *logos*. They were fragments, so to speak, broken off from that. The divine *logos* is the principle of reason apparent in the structure of the universe. It is the reality of reason making human beings unique and giving them dignity set apart from every other creature in this world. As you read John 1, it is very evident that any Greek reading this passage would have bells ringing in their minds. There are so many things said that the Greek reader would have been familiar with. In fact, the great theologian Augustine, who had a background in Neo-Platonism, put it this way after his own conversion in the fourth century. He was thoroughly familiar with the teaching of the *logos*, of the Word of God. He said this: "When I read John 1, John's prologue, I was familiar with every idea in it until I came to the words 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among men,' and that was a radically new idea." Augustine is saying that as a Neo-Platonist what John writes here is something that he understood thoroughly. He

could relate to it, and he could make sense of it as an unbeliever. He could immediately build a bridge, if you like, toward Greek thought.

What is interesting is that John is very careful to clarify what he is saying when he uses the term *logos*. He does not want a Greek reader to be left with the notion of the *logos* as simply a divine principle, a principle of reason or order in the universe or in the mind of human persons. He very carefully talks about the personal nature of the *logos* in a way that the Greeks would have found challenging. He makes it clear that the *logos* is fully equivalent to God. This would have stretched their minds. What would have been particularly challenging and difficult for them is John's statement in John 1:14 where he says, "The *logos* became flesh." He uses the strongest Greek word, *sarx*, to communicate that the *logos* did not simply assume a body, but the *logos* became flesh. That idea would have been extremely challenging, to say the least. In fact, it would have been offensive to somebody with a Neo-Platonic or a Stoic background. This is because while John is prepared to use their language, he is very careful to make sure that his Gospel is not watered down in any way. He is expressing biblical truth as clearly as possible, and he is prepared to use their language in doing so. For the Greeks, the notion that the divine principle, the principle of order in the universe, became flesh, became physical, was an idea that was totally unacceptable. This is the fundamental reason why the early church had to wrestle with the doctrine of the Trinity for 300 or 400 years. In particular, they had to wrestle with the doctrine of the incarnation, the full humanity and the full divinity of the person of Christ. The Greeks could accept the notion that Christ was divine, or they could accept the notion that Christ was human. But that He was both in a complete sense was a notion that was completely at odds with their whole system of thought. For them the physical world was an ethereal world. It was a world of reason, ideas, and spirit. The world of the divine was totally separate from this world. The incarnation brings these two worlds absolutely together. John makes that passionately clear in verse 14 where he says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among men." John uses their language, but he uses it very carefully and very creatively.

Michael Green also makes the point that any Jew reading John 1:1-18 is also having all sorts of bells ringing in their mind. The whole of John's Gospel is so carefully written. It is written in such a sophisticated way that all the way through the Gospel John is ringing bells in the minds of both Greek and Jewish readers. This is fascinating to us because in some ways John's Gospel is the most simple one. It is the one you often start when you are first learning to read Greek. It is the one we often give unbelievers or brand new Christians to read to introduce them to Jesus. It has an apparent simplicity, directness, and clarity to it. But that does not mean it is not very carefully written. In fact, it means exactly the opposite. It is extremely carefully written. To write simply and clearly, you have to write very, very carefully.

John's Gospel is a very sophisticated presentation of biblical truth to both the Greek mind and the Jewish mind. Think about John 1:1-18, the prologue to John's Gospel. There are some examples of John ringing bells in the minds of his Jewish readers. "In the beginning..." The very first words echo the first words of the book of Genesis. John is doing that purposefully. Any Jewish reader is immediately taken back to Genesis Chapter 1. He also refers to the Law of Moses directly there. All the way through the Old Testament, the Word of the Lord, the *dabar Yahweh*, is a repeated expression. It is used in terms of God's creation of the world but also of God giving His Word to His prophets, speaking to His people. Any Jew is going to be immediately thinking of this as soon as they read "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" as speaking of "the Word" as the source of creation. There is another point where a Jewish mind is going to hear something familiar. In Genesis 1, God speaks and the world is brought into being; in John 1, "the Word" is the source of creation. There is also familiarity in what John says about light and many other things through this passage. Go back and read Michael Green on this.

As you think about this thoughtful use of language, whether it is in John 1 or in any other place in the New Testament, what is actually happening is the apostles are making a very carefully reasoned presentation of the truth about Christ. It is not just a very careful use of the language of the hearer or the reader. In John 1, John is seeking to persuade his readers that the Word who is the Creator of the universe has revealed Himself to the human race and has been made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The human person Jesus of Nazareth is indeed one in the same as the one true God. He is the Creator of the universe, the One who orders and brings into being the whole system and structure of this present reality. By John's careful use of language, he is seeking to persuade his readers of that truth. Jesus and the Word, Jesus and God, are one and the same.

In John's Gospel he explicitly tells us what his purpose is in writing. In John 20:30-31, he writes, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." He says he has written for a purpose. He wants the readers to be convinced so that they may know who Jesus truly was and that, in knowing and believing in Him, they may have life. And later in John 21:24 John adds and uses language from the courtroom: "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true." John is using legal language there. He is appealing to testimony, to eyewitness evidence. He is presenting testimony or evidence to persuade his readers of the truth of his message. He wants to prove his case about who Jesus is and the need to believe in Him. If you think back to John's Gospel we see that John does this constantly. The whole Gospel is an appeal to many different witnesses or testimonies about Christ. It is an appeal to the testimony of God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Jesus' own words, His miracles, and His signs. It is also the testimony of the prophets who predicted His coming, Moses, the whole Scriptures, the apostles who have seen and heard Jesus doing and saying these things, and the things the Samaritan woman learned about Jesus. There are many other examples as well. Reading through John's Gospel, you will notice this is one of his major themes. His Gospel is a presentation of testimony or evidence to demonstrate who Jesus is and why we must believe in Him.

That brings us to our fifth principle, a carefully reasoned presentation of the Gospel. Look at Acts 13 where Paul is in the synagogue in the city of Antioch. What Paul is seeking to do, just as John does in his Gospel, is to persuade or convince his hearers about who Jesus is. Basically, we may summarize Paul's approach in Acts 13:16-41 as a powerfully reasoned message to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles aimed at persuading those present that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. That is the heart of this message. Paul is marshalling together evidence to persuade those listening to him that Jesus is indeed the Christ promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. Therefore, they must put their hope in Him. To what does Paul appeal? Number one, he appeals to God's revelation of Himself in the Old Testament, in particular, to His promises about the coming of the Messiah. He quotes several Messianic prophecies. Number two, Paul demonstrates how these prophecies have been fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Number three, he appeals to the testimony of John the Baptist about Jesus because John the Baptist is highly respected by almost all the Jews. And number four, he appeals to the eyewitness testimony about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Those are four of the ways Paul seeks to persuade his hearers. He is giving his hearers reasons to believe in Jesus. His appeal is to special revelation; that is, his appeal is primarily to Scripture. It is not entirely so because he also appeals to the testimony of John the Baptist, the evidence of his ministry, and to the living eyewitnesses of the resurrection. That is the way Paul reasons in the synagogue. We can assume that he did much the same thing most every time when he went to a synagogue or spoke to a Jew or a Gentile who already believed the Old Testament to be the Word of God.

To what does Paul appeal in Athens in Acts 17 and in Lystra in Acts 14? We will deal with these two together. What does he try to demonstrate when he is speaking to the Gentiles? In Acts 14 and 17 Paul appeals to general revelation. Gentiles are unfamiliar with special revelation, that is, Scripture. So Paul appeals to general revelation as he sets forth his case, as he makes his defense of the faith. Let me give you several examples.

Number one, Paul reasons from the knowledge of God, which God has put in the heart and mind of every person. Number two, he appeals to their understanding of the dependence of all of life on the Creator. These people know that the universe and its creatures are not self-created or self-existent. They depend on the power of God for their coming into being and their continued existence. Number three, he appeals to their daily experience of God's providential care. For example, in Acts 14:17 he says to the pagans, "[God] has not left himself without testimony [convincing evidence]. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." So he appeals to their experience of God's providential care and that testimony that God gives.

Number four, Paul calls them to reflect on God's rule over history and over the lives of nations. It is a rule that should lead people to seek God and worship Him. That is what he says in Acts 17:27. He is talking about God's rule over the nations and he says, "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." In other words, God rules history and He rules the nations in order to draw people to Himself, to point to His existence, His power, and His care. This is true if we think about the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of communism across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. God is ruling history to draw people to Himself. He is giving evidence of His just and righteous rule.

Number five, Paul argues from their recognition of the unique dignity of human persons. They know that there is something divine about men and women. As we have seen, their own poets and thinkers acknowledge that we are God's offspring. We would say that people are made in the image of God; there is something special about us. That is how God has made us and He constantly testifies to Himself through this reality of who we are. Number six, he appeals to their own sense of the inadequacy of their worship, their own recognition that human temples cannot contain God, who they know to be the Creator of heaven and earth. God does not live in temples built by hands, they know this, and he appeals to that line of argument. Number seven, very closely related, he insists that idolatry is self-evidently foolish because idols are made by people who are themselves the creations of God. God is obviously far greater than idols. It is exactly the same argument as Isaiah makes in that section on idolatry in Isaiah 41-49. And finally, he climaxes his argument by appealing to what he calls the proof of the resurrection of Christ. He says all people may know about this proof by paying attention to the testimony of those who witnessed it. Paul's messages to pagans are aimed at giving them compelling reasons as to why they should become worshippers of the one true God and put their hope in His Son, Jesus, whom God appointed as the universal judge. That is his fundamental line of approach, giving them compelling reasons why they should become worshippers of the one true God and put their hope in Christ.

There is an objection that we need to consider that is very frequently raised by Christians. The objection is that Paul renounced the use of reason. We need to look at this fairly carefully. I have heard preachers in this country making this argument. People very strongly and passionately argue for the position that Paul renounced the use of reason in presenting the Gospel. In Korea, this is also a very widely held view in Reformed and Presbyterian circles. There are books written in Korea arguing that Paul's approach in Acts 17 was both a failure and it was mistaken. I have heard that same argument given here in America by a professor of apologetics. I heard him preaching on Acts 17 in church one day, and that is exactly

what he said. This message is a failure and it is a mistake. Now, why would somebody make the argument that Paul renounced the use of reason? They appeal to 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. We need to look at those passages because this is quite an important issue. If Paul renounced the use of reason then basically everything I have said in the last four sessions is a total waste of time and you need to forget it as soon as possible. We will look at the particular verses in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 where this argument takes its force and to which those who take this view appeal.

In 1 Corinthians 1:17 Paul says, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” That verse is understood by those who take this view to mean that the preacher must renounce any attempt to seek to persuade one’s hearers and simply let the cross of Christ have its power. They say our calling is simply to proclaim rather than to persuade; that is the heart of the argument. Your calling as you go out into the church is simply to proclaim the message, to declare it, not to seek to reason with people, persuade them, or use any kind of wisdom in presenting the message. First Corinthians 1:18-21 continues, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; / the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?” Again, those who take this view will argue that the Gospel is always literally foolish to any unbeliever. Therefore it is absolutely pointless trying to persuade somebody of its truth or trying to convince them about who Christ was or who God is. It is a waste of time to talk about who we are or the problem of evil or anything else under the sun. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” Those who will take this view will say that literally the Gospel is foolish to the unbeliever so all the Christian preacher can do is simply declare it and let it fall where God wills rather than seek to persuade.

You are getting a contrast built between declaration and persuasion. In 1 Corinthians 2:1 Paul is talking about when he came to Corinth: “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.” The argument is that Paul is saying, “When I came to Corinth, I no longer made any effort to speak eloquently.” You remember I made the point that Paul’s message in Acts 17 has all sorts of rhetorical flourishes and touches in it. It is very carefully and eloquently put together. Those who take this view are saying that after Athens Paul changed his approach, repented of it if you like, and when he got to Corinth he did something entirely different. He did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom, but he simply proclaimed. I point out in passing that Paul uses the word “testimony” here, which is a legal word about evidence. The passage goes on in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 to say, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith would not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” The argument is made that Paul is saying here, “I have made no attempt to persuade anybody, to convince them that Christianity is the truth, that Jesus is the Son of God, that God exists, or anything else. I did not want to do that; I simply depended upon the power of the Spirit, and that is all that matters.” Proponents of this view therefore claim that we declare and we wait for the Spirit’s power to work so that people’s faith may be simply in the power of God rather than in any careful reasoning or presentation of the Gospel made by the preacher.

Clearly, this is a very powerful argument and it raises at least the following three important questions, which we need to think about. Number one, are these words in 1 Corinthians a denunciation by Paul of his own previous practice of reasoning in the synagogue, and in particular, to the pagans in Lystra and Athens? Or to put it another way, did Paul repent of his message to the Athenians and regard it as a failure and a mistake? Some people take that view very strongly that Paul repented of what he had done

in Athens and decided after Athens he would literally speak only about Christ and Him crucified. In the future, he would say nothing about the existence of God or the nature of God; he would no more talk about pagan worship, about idolatry, and no more build bridges to pagan unbelief. In the future he would simply proclaim the ABC's of the Gospel. Christ died for your sins, repent and believe in Him, etc. Now, is that what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 1? Notice that it rejects not only Paul's message in Athens, but also Paul's approach in the synagogue as well, which is also very carefully reasoned. Some people are not prepared to acknowledge that when they make this point, the appeal in the synagogue is primarily to special revelation, to Old Testament prophecy, so they will accept that. But it is still basically a persuasive and rational argument that Paul is making. So if this argument were really true, it would reject what Paul is doing in the synagogue as well. That is the first question: is Paul denouncing his own previous practice?

Number two, how does Luke present the way Paul communicates the Gospel? Does Luke, for example, set up a tension between declaration or proclamation and reasoning? That is what this argument requires. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul is saying now I only preach, I no longer reason or persuade. How does Luke present Paul's communication of the Gospel as he describes it? How does he present it before Paul got to Athens? How does he present it while he was in Athens, and how does he present it after he left Athens? How does Luke teach us about Paul's method of communicating the Gospel? Remember, Luke is an inspired writer, so this is important.

Number three, if Paul is not rejecting his own previous practice, why does he use this strong language about persuasive words and eloquence in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2? What does he mean by it? If Paul is not renouncing reason, what is he saying? That is the third question here.

We will go through these points one by one. We will begin with this question: was Paul's preaching in Athens a failure and a mistake? That is one of the charges that has been made. They say Paul repented of that preaching. If you turn to Acts 17, you find absolutely no suggestion from Luke that he considered Paul's approach in Athens to be mistaken in any way. This is clearly written sometime after these events, at least in its final form, but Luke makes no suggestion whatsoever that he thinks that what Paul did in Athens was wrong. Of course, Luke and Paul are friends. They are fellow travelers and people who labor together in the Gospel. If Paul had felt his work in Athens was unworthy of the Gospel, we may be sure that he would have made this known to Luke and Luke would have mentioned it. But he breathed no hint of it. In addition, this is not simply an argument from silence. Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Athens and elsewhere is an account inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is part of Scripture. It is to be regarded as an authoritative account binding on the readers just like any other part of Scripture. It is a dangerous way to approach Scripture to suggest that a speech of Paul is a mistake when it is clearly recorded by Paul as a part of his ministry. Paul is an ambassador of Christ, appointed by Christ to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles, and here we have the primary example of Paul doing that very thing. Are we supposed to conclude that this was in error when there is nothing to tell us so? Luke would most certainly have informed us of this if there is any likelihood of this at all. In fact, Luke presents this to us as something for us to read, to understand, and to emulate. This is true of this account of Paul's ministry in Athens and everywhere else he speaks. We cannot pick and choose between passages of Scripture and say, "I do not like this so I will regard what Paul did here as wrong," when there is nothing in the text to tell us so.

Was Paul's ministry in Athens a failure? Look at Acts 17:34. Luke tells us quite explicitly that some people were converted. Some said, in verse 32, "We want to hear you again on this subject." I would say that is remarkable that there were people converted here. Just think of the context. I often go and speak at colleges all over the world and sometimes to groups of faculty who are not believers. I would be

absolutely thrilled if I could come back from one such meeting and say several people became Christians. It would be wonderful; it would be fantastic! The other thing you should notice is that when Luke records people's names for us he always does so intentionally. People whose names he records are people who had a particular significance in the life of the church in later years. When he gives us these names, Dionysius and Damaris, we can be sure that these are people who had a deep impact on the life of the church in Athens and perhaps elsewhere in the years to come. Every one of these few people who believed is precious in the eyes of the Lord. God does not measure things by numbers in the way we do. Jesus tells the parable of the Shepherd who went to search for one lost sheep. Every individual is precious in the eyes of God. He goes to extraordinary lengths to save just one. If you or I look back at our lives, and think of any single individual who has become a believer through our ministry (and through all sorts of other means that God has used), we would say our whole lives have been worth it for just that one person. That is the preciousness of individuals. I know this man who calls me every week from England who was converted in 1972 with me. He is a schizophrenic, and he is badly damaged. If he were not a believer, he would be a psychiatric hospital for his whole life. Obviously, his calls every week take a lot of time. He often calls at 2:00, 3:00, or 4:00 in the morning English time, which is the evening here, because he does not sleep well. I would say if I had never touched anyone else's life apart from his, then my whole life would be worth it. It is such folly to read an account like this where Luke explicitly tells us people were converted and say this was a mistake and a failure. It is a completely sinful way to approach Scripture. I will put it that strongly.

We may make another point here: suppose verses 33 and 34 were not there in Acts 17; would it be appropriate of us to draw the conclusion that Paul's message was a mistake and a failure if Luke had not recorded the fruit of this message? It certainly would not. There are many occasions when we read the Gospels and the book of Acts when we are not told explicitly that anybody became a Christian at that time. There are lots of examples in the Gospels like this, lots of encounters that Jesus has with people that do not result in anyone's immediate conversion. It would be completely wicked to draw the conclusion from there that Jesus' approach was mistaken or failed. The same is true when we read the book of Acts, and Luke does not record any particular conversions. Jesus and Paul, just like you and I, are often sowing seeds in the human heart rather than reaping. For Jesus, much of the fruit of His ministry is not realized until after His resurrection. As He says, it is necessary for a grain of wheat to fall into the ground and die before it bears fruit. In the early chapters of Acts we read of huge numbers of people coming to faith. One day we will find out exactly how many of those had heard Jesus preaching and teaching or had personal contacts with Him during His earthly ministry. We can have absolutely no doubt that many of the people in Jerusalem who were converted in those days, months, and years following Pentecost were people who had been touched by the earthly ministry of Christ. For example, when we read in Acts 6:7 that a great number of priests came to the faith, who can seriously doubt that these people had not had some contact with the ministry of Christ? In the same way, it would be completely wrong to conclude that when there are either no converts or just a few after one of Paul's encounters with people, that this means that there is something inadequate about Paul's presentation of the Gospel. I cannot imagine any serious and thoughtful Bible teacher putting forth such a view if they stopped to reflect on the implications of it. What this does is set Scripture against Scripture, 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 against Acts 17, in a way that is totally cavalier and unacceptable.

Our second question is how does Luke present the teaching of the apostle Paul, and what kind of language does he use? Does he, for example, set proclamation or declaration on one side over against persuasion on the other? That is the heart of this argument. How does Luke present the preaching of Paul? Let us look at a whole series of passages. First of all, read Acts 9:20-22 and notice the language that Luke uses. This is right after Saul's conversion, and he is in Damascus. It says, "At once he began to preach in synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God." In verse 22 Luke used the language of

proclamation or declaration. “Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.” There Luke put together the word “preach” or “proclaim” with the language of “baffled by proving.”

A second example, in Acts 9:27-29, is when Paul is back in Jerusalem. Barnabas describes Saul’s ministry, and it says, “He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed [...] speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.” Then verse 29 says, “He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews.” Again, Luke put together language of proclamation (declaring boldly) and the language of reasoning. He debated with the Grecian Jews.

Look also at Acts 14:1-3, which says, “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews believed.” Then he goes on to say they spent considerable time in Iconium and spoke boldly for the Lord there. Here Luke’s language is not specific. It could include both proclamation and persuasion, and it almost certainly included both.

Take Acts 17:1-4 where Luke is summarizing Paul’s ministry. “When they passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was that Paul went into the synagogue and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead.” Notice how he summarizes what he has done. Luke tells us that, as his custom was, he reasoned, explained, and proved. Then Paul summarizes what he did by saying “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” So the language of proclamation, of reason and persuasion, are together in verse 4. “Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.” Luke is quite happy to exchange the word “believe” or “converted” with “were persuaded” as he speaks. The language of reason, persuasion, proof, and proclamation come together.

Another example is in Acts 17:16-18, while Paul was in Athens. “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” What did he do? He reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as within the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. Verse 18 says they began to dispute with him. Why did they dispute with him? “They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.” Again, you have got this language of reasoning in all these different contexts summarized by Paul preaching the Good News.

Take another passage from Corinth itself, where Paul is supposed to have changed his approach. Acts 18:1-4 says, “After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” Paul is reasoning and persuading people, both Jews and Greeks, in Corinth where he is supposedly no longer using persuasion. If that is what he meant in 1 Corinthians when he said he did not use persuasive words, Luke contradicts him in this passage. Luke says right here that he did use persuasion.

The crux comes in Acts 18:5. “When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” Some people quite seriously argue on the basis of that verse there. They say that at this point Paul repented of his previous approach and changed what he was doing. They say during his first period in Corinth he carried on the same old

sinful pattern of reasoning and persuading, but then he decided suddenly to devote himself exclusively to preaching. From that time onward he only proclaimed. It is argued that these words are describing a transition in Paul's ministry. From this point on, he would reason and persuade no more. Again, I will quote 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, "I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom [...] I resolved to know nothing [...] except Jesus Christ and him crucified. [...] My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words." Here is the radical change in Paul's approach; that is the argument. But is that convincing, and is that what Luke is saying here? No, he says nothing about Paul repenting. Luke is not contrasting preaching and persuasion. Notice he uses the word "testifying" in Acts 18:5.

"Testifying" is a word from the courtroom. It is a presentation of evidence to convince people. What Luke is talking about here is not Paul doing something different in the way he presented the Gospel; he is simply saying that from this point onward Paul was a full-time evangelist in Corinth. That is all he is saying. Paul devotes himself exclusively to teaching rather than working as a tentmaker. That is the contrast that is being made here. Why is he able to do this? He does this because Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia, from the church at Philippi, with gifts to support his ministry.

Paul's practice when he went to any new city was to support his ministry by working as a tentmaker because he refused to accept money from the unbelievers to whom he was proclaiming the Gospel. He tells us absolutely explicitly in Corinthians that he refused to accept money from those to whom he preached the Gospel. He was happy to accept money from those already converted and churches already established. That is exactly what is happening here. If you read Philippians 4:14-15 and 2 Corinthians 11:8-9, Paul tells us in those two passages about the gift that was given by the Philippian church from Macedonia, which enabled him to devote himself exclusively to preaching after Silas and Timothy came from Philippi, from Macedonia. That is all that Luke is saying in Acts 18. He is not saying anything about Paul's approach to sharing the Gospel. He is simply saying he worked as a tentmaker and preached when he was able. Then when Silas and Timothy came with the financial support, he devoted himself exclusively to the ministry of the Word.

If you look at Acts 18:13, those who are opposing Paul's ministry in Corinth summarize it this way: "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the Law." Everybody else sees Paul as trying to persuade people, which is what he is still doing. After two years in Corinth, Paul went to Ephesus. We read about Paul's practice there in Acts 18:19. "They arrived at Ephesus, where he left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews." Luke is still using precisely the same language to communicate how Paul presented the Gospel.

Take another example. This is not about Paul, but it is about Apollos in Acts 18:27-28. "When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia [Corinth], the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ." Luke obviously has no problem whatsoever in using the language of reason, persuasion, proof, debate, and argument to present how anyone proclaimed the Gospel.

Finally in Acts 19:8-10, Luke presents Paul's ministry in Ephesus for the three years that he was there. Look at the language that Luke uses here to describe Paul's ministry. This is some years after he has been in Corinth and supposedly changed his approach. "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly [declared] there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to leave and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years." Paul has not changed his approach in any kind of way. There are many other examples we could

look at about the way Luke describes how Paul presented the Gospel. In summary, there is absolutely no linguistic basis whatsoever to argue that one can make an opposition between proclamation in preaching and declaring boldly and reasoning and persuading people. Luke quite happily can summarize what Paul does by using any of that language. Again, I would urge you to read the section in Michael Green on this subject.

That brings us to our final question, question 3: why does Paul use such strong words about wisdom, persuasive words, and eloquence in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2? If Paul is not repenting of his method of presenting the Gospel, what is he talking about by this heavy language? To answer that question, you need to look carefully at some of the things that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. Notice, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1:20-21 he talks about the wise man, the scholar, the philosopher of this age, and then he talks about the wisdom of this world. He says, "Since in the wisdom of God the world through its [worldly] wisdom did not know him..." In verse 22 Paul says, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom." He continues in 1 Corinthians 1:25, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom." Man's wisdom is the wisdom of the world, the philosopher of this age. First Corinthians 2:1 says, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom." Verses 6-8 say, "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. [...] None of the rulers of this age understood it..." Paul is speaking about the wisdom of this world and the rulers of this world.

What Paul is doing here is not renouncing reason; he is simply drawing attention to the fundamental problem of the Greek mind in his day. Every culture has its idols that stand between it and God. The Jews were skeptical about Jesus because they were proud of their heritage as God's people. They thought, we are Abraham's children, we belong to God, we have the Law, God did His signs among us. Jews seek signs. The Jews were proud of being God's special people, and that stopped them from hearing the message of Christ. The Greeks were proud of their heritage of great wisdom. All of philosophy since Plato is basically a series of footnotes to Plato. The Greeks were very proud of their wisdom. God's gift of wisdom to them had become a snare to them. They considered themselves the superior race. They worshipped their own brilliance of mind and their philosophical heritage rather than God, the giver of wisdom. They trusted in their own wisdom rather than in God. That is what Paul is talking about here. He is contrasting the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the Greeks, which has no room for the Gospel of Christ. They did not believe that God intervenes in history or that God could become flesh. They rejected that absolutely. That is why these people in Athens sneer and regard Paul as a babbler for talking about Jesus and His incarnation and resurrection. They think this is nonsense. They think it is foolishness because it does not fit with their wisdom. That is the point that Paul is making. In every age, in every culture, the prevailing wisdom rejects Christianity as folly. Paul is not renouncing reason. He is contrasting the wisdom of this world, the wisdom of this age, with the true wisdom that comes from God. That is the fundamental point that Paul is making here. If you read Romans 1:18-32, you will find Paul making exactly the same point there. The people reject the knowledge of God and become foolish in their thinking. They think they are wise, but they become fools. That is exactly what he is saying in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. He is contrasting the wisdom of the Gospel with the folly of the wisdom of this age.

The second point that Paul is making is about eloquence. Everywhere in Greece there were schools of rhetoric, schools that taught eloquence. They taught the rhetorical skills and the skills of debate. And in particular, there were schools of sophists who were trained in rhetoric and public eloquence. They hired themselves out for a high fee to anybody who would pay that fee to defend them in court or anywhere else. They boasted that they were so skillful in rhetoric, eloquence, and debate that they could persuade anybody of anything whether it was true or not. That is what Paul has been answering. He is not saying,

“I do not think for a second about what I am saying when I preach the Gospel. I make every effort not to be eloquent.” That is not what he is saying. Instead he is saying, “My methods are not those of these schools of rhetoric in Athens and other Greek cities where nobody is concerned about truth but only brilliance.” This is similar to many lawyers in our own culture. You can hire a lawyer if you have enough money, and you have a chance of getting off of the charges you face. You know that is true. There is a huge difference between the kind of defense in court that a poor person gets and the kind of defense somebody wealthy gets. You get what you pay for. There are a lot of lawyers who will defend anything regardless of whether it is true or not. Many lawyers will defend someone whether they are guilty or innocent, simply for money. They are clever enough to do it. That is what Paul is talking about here, that kind of problem.