

FLIPPING THE WORLD ON ITS HEAD

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Kesuli Zacari was a very devout Muslim living in Dahoua, a village in Niger, West Africa. While still in high school, he formed a group of youth whose goal was to resist Christians. His village made him the Imam. When he went off to university he formed a youth group to win Christians to Islam. They were determined to stamp out the Christian heresy in his homeland.

Kesuli at times lacked food. They decided to get some food from a Baptist missionary as well as argue the errors of Christianity. But he realized he knew nothing of what they believed so how could he attack them? So he got ahold of a Bible and read it. He was impressed by the life of Jesus and how He helped people. He was warned not to read that heretical book. He told them he was only reading it to convince Christians they were wrong and to become Muslims.

As he read the gospel, Kesuli's heart was being drawn to Jesus. He lost interest in the calls to prayer. He stopped going to the mosque. His mind was filled with verbal pictures of Jesus. He now understood why the missionary was so kind.

Kesuli entered a period of deep soul searching. What should he do? While his whole being cried out for Islam, there was another force working in his mind. He decided that he would become a Christian for one month. At the end of that month he would make his final decision. He began listening to Adventist World Radio and was deeply impressed by the Bible-based sermons. He requested their literature and books. He was introduced to the ADRA staff working in Niger. His whole world was not flipped on its head. He was now right side up with God. Kesuli is the first convert to become a Seventh-day Adventist in Niger. With a commitment to Jesus Christ he was ordained as a gospel minister with a mission to reach his Muslim friends there.

Wherever Christianity has gone it has upended the world's values of sin. We are thrilled to follow Luke's account of the missionary invasion of Europe. Luke's itinerary would bring Paul through a distance of about ninety-five miles to Thessalonica westward through the Egnatian Way. "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue

of the Jews.” Acts 17:1. The city had a central synagogue for its Jewish community.

As was Paul’s custom, his port of call was the local Jewish synagogue. Probably the so-called custom was an official invitation by the president of the synagogue congregation to address the community, which task Paul performed diligently. “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures.” Acts 17:2.

There are those who think more of apostolic example than they do of the commandments of God. We do not believe that they that were sent were greater than He who sent them, therefore we give the commandments of God and Christ (which are always the same) preference. But we believe in following the example of the apostles in the main, because they were usually exactly right. Acts 17:2 presents a practice which we believe in following. When Paul came to Thessalonica he found a congregation of the Jews; “and Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures.” From this we learn that Paul was in the habit of observing the Sabbath. We are not surprised at this, for he himself said, “I delight in the law of God.” Compare this statement in regard to Paul’s custom with the fact that we have the record of only one sermon preached by Paul upon the first day of the week, and that upon that same first day he traveled twenty miles. Upon which side is the weight of apostolic example?

When Felix was a teenager, Protestant pastors occasionally came to speak at his school. Several times the students chased the pastors out of the village, and sometimes Felix joined them. But he could not deny that these pastors were different from the religious leaders he knew.

One day he passed a public meeting conducted by a Protestant group. He stopped to listen and decided to attend the meetings. He arranged for studies and planned to join this church. But before he could join, an elderly Adventist neighbor invited him to evangelistic meetings in town. But Felix decided against attending the Adventist meetings since he had already found another church. The Adventist meetings were held close to Felix’s home, and he could hear the preached from his front porch. Felix noticed that the pastor quoted many Bible texts. Felix began following him night after night.

When the message on the Sabbath was presented, Felix felt strong conviction. He left home and walked to the meeting. He arrived just

as the pastor made an altar call. Felix never took a seat, but walked straight to the front in response to the pastor's invitation. Felix has been baptized and has found peace and happiness in working for God as a literature evangelist.

In the time of Paul in the Greco-Roman world, itinerant preachers were known to roam from city to city addressing their audiences in the popular assemblies. These fake charlatans gained the ears of their hearers because of their empty rantings and high-falutin doctrines. But Paul was a different preacher. He preached salvation to the Jews. This is borne out by the fact that the content of his preaching derived from the Scriptures. From selected passages from the Scriptures, he demonstrated the historic facts accomplished in the ministry, death and exaltation of Jesus were fulfilled in the prophecies about Him.

From such authoritative texts, Paul was able to show that the Messiah was destined to suffer death and to rise from the dead. "Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ." Acts 17:3.

Among other things, Paul proclaimed to his hearers that the Messiah was this Jesus whom he preached to them. This central proclamation for Paul was the paramount instruction before Hellenistic Jewish audiences in mission lands. Paul attempts to persuade the Thessalonian Jews that Jesus of Nazareth, who was put to death under Pontius Pilate, is indeed the Messiah that they were anticipating. This is particularly difficult since most Jews expected a Messiah that came with power and broke the chains of Roman rule. It is thus necessary for Paul to explain to them where the Old Testament teaches that the Messiah must suffer and die.

It is interesting to notice Paul's method of preaching. He "reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered," etc. He did not use a single text as an excuse for reading a learned essay, or delivering an eloquent oration, but he preached the Bible itself. The Bible was his text-book, and he studied it with his congregation. And he did not present his views in an apologetic manner. He knew what the Bible taught, and believed it; and there was no guess-work about the matter. He presented the truths of God's word as facts. It is this sort of preaching that wins souls if anything will, and it was so in this case.

“And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few.” Acts 17:4. These God-fearing Greeks are Gentiles who have already turned from their gods and goddesses and embraced the one true God. Now, together with some of the Jews, they respond to the gospel. The prominent women were from the upper classes, probably both Jew and Gentile.

Next Luke treats of the opposition to the gospel engineered by the unbelieving Jews. “But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy” (Acts 17:5). They became jealous of Paul’s success in winning converts from among low and upper middle class citizens. The defection of many of the God-fearers, especially the influential ones, to Paul’s gospel fired their hatred against Paul and his associates. What probably appeared as an ethnic squall, has become a popular agitation later spearheaded by “certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar (Acts 17:5). These are a good-for-nothing set of street thugs set against the Christians. These villains set the city in an uproar.

The ring-leaders arrived at Jason’s house “and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.” Acts 17:5. They sought opportunity to drag him and his group before the people’s assembly.

When the raging gangsters did not find Paul and his team in Jason’s house, they seized upon Jason and his fellow Christians, and rough-handled them before bringing them up to the politarchs. Here they accused them of harboring political (messianic) agitators: men who had turned the world upside down and whose revolutionary activities Jason had sponsored. They also alleged that the missionaries were contradicting by their behavior and utterances the decrees of Caesar, and that in their illegal propaganda, they had proclaimed “another king,” that is, Jesus as a rival ruler who would replace the Emperor.

What is meant by the allegation “flipping the world on its head”? At its face value, the charge suggests an activity which had happened outside of Thessalonica. They say, “These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also” (Acts 17:6). The missionaries were looked upon as men who had been guilty of seditious and revolutionary activities in the other provinces of the Roman Empire.

I have the impression that the villains from the Agora had been led to regard Paul and his co-workers as a type of fake philosopher-preachers who roved from city to city teaching their hearers the need

for the changing of values and unpalatable doctrines. The many cults, both religious and political, in a port city like Thessalonica were believed to have guaranteed the security to the city which ensured mutual and peaceful ethnic co-existence and prosperity of commerce. The preaching of Paul on the central role of Jesus in salvation and his divine election as the Messiah would easily be feared in such a multi-religious community as a reversal of their value-system, indeed a “flipping the world on its head” for those whose value-systems were at stake should they turn to the new way of life demanded by the Christian gospel.

Well, if that is what they had been doing, ought they not to have been stopped? What business had Paul and Silas to go around stirring up the people? Just this right: The Lord had sent them out with a special message of truth for the people. Their only work was to deliver their message. If people rejected it, and grew angry at them, that was none of their business. Indeed, that is just what they were taught to expect. The Saviour said, “For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against for mother-in-law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.” Matt. 10:35, 36. It was not because Christ loved strife, that He said this; but He had come to speak the truth, and He knew that the truth would cause division. Men who reject the truth will ever be opposed to those who, by accepting the truth, condemn them.

The time is at hand when “the Lord maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof.” Isa. 24:1. It is necessary to turn the world upside down to get it in its right position. Men are calling good evil, and evil good. They are exalting the proud, when it is only the humble who are truly exalted. The Gospel puts things the right way up, and so the apostles were described as “these that have turned the world upside down.” Now men may, by receiving the Gospel, be put right, but if they can not, God will not allow His world to remain for ever inverted, and the time is at hand when He will put it right. Then those who have not themselves been converted will drop out of it.

Somebody said that “the single most cause of atheism in our world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, but walk out of the church doors and deny Him with their lifestyle. This is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

And this problem is nothing new. When Mahatma Gandhi was a student in South Africa he often attended a Christian church. He was attracted to Christ and often read the New Testament. But, he never became a Christian. When asked why he said, "I got the impression that [Christians] were just a group of worldly-minded people going to church for recreation and conformity to custom. I have the highest admiration for the Christian life and for the Christ of the Bible. And I might have become a Christian if I could have seen one."

The Apostle Paul was all for walking the talk. He said, "We, having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken, we also believe, and therefore speak." 2 Cor. 4:13. That is what got Paul into so much trouble with the men of his time. A man may preach theories of truth as much as he pleases, and as long as they are only theories to him, he will not come into serious conflict with anybody; but the world does not like to be troubled with a man who believes with all his heart and soul that which he speaks. "These that have turned the world upside down, have come hither also." Well, why should they not? what objection have you to them? "Why, they believe what they speak, and they actually expect us to believe also; and they say that faith works, and so they practice what they preach, and they ask us to act according to faith." No; if you wish to be accounted a good fellow in the world, do not believe very much, and do not be too particular about always acting consistently with what you profess to believe; but if you would have peace with God, even the very peace of God, then believe with all your heart, for "being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Then comes hope which "maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Faith, hope, and love abide for ever, and he who holds to them shall also abide.

While the allegation of "flipping the world on its head" appears to be a social and religious vilification of the missionaries, the accusation of violating the "decrees of Caesar" is a rather serious political charge. The Roman Caesars issued decrees warning anyone about predicting a change of ruler over the empire. Caesar Augustus issued an edict in A.D. 11 explicitly forbidding the use of astrology to predict his or anyone else's day of death. The emperor Tiberius reaffirmed this decree by putting to death foreigners who ignored it. In response to these decrees, some cities pledged their commitment to the Caesar by offering oaths of loyalty.

Because Paul's preaching about Jesus includes references to Him as "Lord," the fact that He has a "kingdom," and that He is coming again in judgment, it is easy to see how Paul's words can be turned against him as a threat to the Roman Caesar. Paul's proclamation about the day of the Lord and the second coming of Christ easily signals to those who hear that he is preaching a change of ruler in direct defiance of the decrees of Caesar.

When it comes to allegiances, the followers of Christ must be clear: we are not first Americans, but we are first followers of Jesus, citizens of the kingdom of God that transcends geographical boundaries and political allegiances. At the same time, Paul makes it clear in Romans 13 that we have an obligation, under normal and ordinary circumstances, to obey the laws of the government under which we live, that civil government exists under the sovereign rule of God, and that we should expect punishment from that government if/when we determine not to live according to its laws. Jesus is King, whether the rebels in Thessalonica understood that correctly or not. If we get the right king, everything else will fall into place.

The Christian gospel had come to Thessalonica. How was it received by the populus? The reader is made to feel the panic expressed by the crowd at the Agora, as well as by the city-state magistrates. "And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things." Acts 17:8. The politarchs examined the allegation, which was not looked upon kindly, quite diligently and unemotionally. Jason most probably disputed the accusations of sheltering persons who taught distrustful things of mankind. The evidence for the charges was scanty. It could not be established that the apostles disseminated any form of seditious overthrow of Roman government, much less the Caesar himself, by their proclamation of King Jesus to the Thessalonian audience. Since there was no substance in the allegation and the grounds for establishing a case against them was weak, the accused persons could not be legally prosecuted.

The leaders of the city having made sufficient assessment of the facts then freed Jason and his associates on bail. "And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go." Acts 17:9. They were enjoined to keep the peace and recommended to keep the preachers away from the city for some time.

Paul's life is now in danger and his presence possibly places the lives of the other Christians in jeopardy as long as he remains in the

city. This makes it impossible for him to return. Think how rugged conditions must have been for these missionaries. Traveling was downright tough. Today we slide into an air-conditioned car with smooth leather seats, CD player, windows closed tightly, full speed ahead. When we grow weary of the road, we pull over and check into a comfortable place for overnight lodging. We have a choice, with all the nice amenities.

Those rugged warriors of the cross walked. If they rode, it was on crude, wooden-wheeled carts or straddling the back of sweating beasts for miles, enduring the extreme weather conditions.

Food rations were slim. They knew no modern health care. If it hadn't been for Luke, Paul would have fainted along the way. They lived and ministered in harm's way almost every day. Still, Paul and his companions pressed on.

Western Christians have become a soft-bodied lot of folks. We look out for ourselves, our rights, and our conveniences. We have little tolerance for anything that interrupts a life of ease. Sacrifice rarely crosses our minds. When we're called upon to consider paying a heavy price, we wince and stammer and politely excuse ourselves. Or we say we'll help support those who are called to go.

Try to image life in the sandals of Paul. Would you have been his companion? Would you have struck out with him when he struck out from Thessalonica? What made him do it? The mysterious explosive in this spiritual bomb was a radically different idea of love from that that had been dreamed of by the world's philosophers or ethics teachers, a new invention that took friend and foe alike by surprise. It was the love of God. God so loved the world that He sent His Son for sin (Rom. 8:3).

The ancients had a story that illustrated their most sublime idea of love: Admetus was a noble, handsome young man with all the personal qualities of excellence. He fell sick with a disease that the oracle of the gods pronounced would be fatal unless someone could be found who would die in his place. His friends went from one to another, inquiring, "Would you be willing to die for Admetus?" All agreed that he was a wonderful young man, but "Sorry," they said, "we couldn't die for him." His parents were asked, and they said, "We love our son, but sorry, we couldn't die for him." Finally his friends asked the beautiful girl who loved him, Alcestis. "Yes," she said, "because he is such a good man and because the world needs him so, I am willing to die for him!"

The philosophers boasted: "This is love willing to die for a good man!" Imagine their shock when the apostles said that wasn't it at all. "One will hardly die for a righteous man, though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love [*agape*] for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," yes, "while we were enemies" (Romans 5:7, 8, 10, RSV). A message like that either captured your soul or turned you into an implacable enemy.

The love of Christ fired the soul of Dr. David Livingston and it's where we get that phrase, "Dr. Livingston, I presume." He was such a famous missionary in Africa that the main newspaper in England sent a reporter down into Africa to find out what he was doing because they hadn't heard from him in a while. And, so after this reporter's search, he stumbled onto Dr. Livingston and said that, "Dr. Livingston I presume." But, listen to what it says about his life. What sustains men and women who leave behind family and comfort to go to another country for the gospel's sake as did Dr. Livingston? More directly, what kept Livingston there when as a medical doctor he could have lived comfortably in his native Scotland? Livingston himself answered that question. After sixteen years of service in Africa, he returned to Scotland and was asked to speak at the University of Glasgow. One of his arms had been rendered useless as a result of a lion's attack. His body bore physical evidence of suffering he had endured with twenty-seven bouts of jungle fever. His face a leathery brown from exposure to the elements, was creased from the cares of hard life battling the Turks and the slave traders. A hush crept over the students who listened to this man realizing that this was no ordinary person. "Shall I tell you what sustained me in the midst of trials and hardships and loneliness of my exiled life" he asked. "Yes." And then he gave them the answer. "It was a promise. A promise of a gentlemen of the most sacred honor. It was this promise. 'Low, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.'" At Livingston's death, they found his body bent in prayer as he knelt by his bed and beside him was a small, well worn New Testament opened to Matthew 28 and he had written in the margin next to verse 20 was the word of a gentlemen. Did Livingston feel that he had made a great sacrifice? Not in the least. He was fired by the love of God.

When Paul and Silas were forced to leave Thessalonica, they came to Berea, where also there was a congregation of Jews of whom it is said, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they

received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” Acts 17:11. Here we have true nobility, according to the Bible standard. It is now considered a mark of wisdom and honor to doubt the word of God, and to criticize and try to pick flaws in it; but God decides differently. “Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The words “more noble” mean literally “of better birth”; so those who with meekness receive the word of God into good and honest hearts are of far higher birth than those who despise it, since they are the sons and daughters of God.

They “searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” What Scriptures did they search? The Old Testament—the only Scriptures they had. What things were Paul and Silas preaching? The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth—his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second advent. Then, since these Bereans searched the Old Testament to find out the truth of the apostle’s preaching, it must be that they referred them to that same book. Then it must be, also, that the gospel is found in the Old Testament as well as in the New. And so it is, for Paul says that the Gospel was preached to Abraham, and he lived many hundred years before any of the New Testament was written. Indeed, although we have the New Testament, we could not be certain that it is true, or that Christ is the Son of God, and the Saviour of the world, if it were not for the Old Testament.

It is worth while also to notice how the Bereans studied the Scriptures. They searched them *daily*. Nothing but daily study of the word will give a person an understanding of its truths. And they studied with an object; they desired to find out if those things were so. And we may well suppose that, since they searched for this purpose, it was their firm intention to accept the teaching of Paul and Silas, if they were found. To be true and this is proved by the next verse: “Therefore, many of them believed.” This would be the case now if men would search the Scriptures; but as it was then so now, the majority prefer to search tradition, for the testimonies of the fathers, or science (falsely so called), or if they do search the Scriptures, they do so with a spirit of caviling and doubt, and do not, like the noble Bereans, receive the word “with all readiness of mind.”

“Therefore many of them believed; also of honorable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few.” Acts 17:12.

A pastor was in a nice restaurant one day. when the waitress came over to the table, he said, "Have you made the wonderful discovery of knowing Christ personally?" In the conversation she indicated that she had not and began to make excuses—she could not get to church because she worked, she would be more comfortable with a Bible in her own language (Romanian), and so on. Since there were not very many people in the restaurant, he reached for a copy of *Steps to Christ*, but discovered he did not have any with him. So he took a napkin, wrote out the steps, and gave it to her. He went on his way but later dropped off a Romanian Bible for her.

At a later date he came back to the restaurant, now very busy. Across the restaurant the waitress saw him and came over to tell him that she was reading the Bible. In fact, she had sometimes read it all night long! Better yet, she had come to know Christ. Then she pulled the napkin out of her pocket, now almost in tatters, and said, "Would you write that down for me again? I have showed this so many times, my napkin is coming apart." The power of the Word of God had turned another life upside-down. Sin has turned the world upside down. The gospel of Jesus Christ turns those who receive Him right side up.