

The Noble Bereans?

Mark Heath, 11 Jan 2004

We only know about the Bereans from one very short passage from Scripture (Acts 17:10-15), yet the word "Berean" has been used in recent times as part of the name for countless ministries and churches. Visit Google and type in Berean, and you will see the "Berean Call", "Berean Christian Stores", "Berean School of the Bible", "Berean Bible Society", "Berean Christian Ministries", "Berean Bible Church", "Berean Baptist Church" - the list goes on and on.

So who were the Bereans, and why do so many organisations wish to name themselves after the people of this ancient city? Berea was the next stop for Paul after he visited Thessalonica. At Thessalonica, Paul had spent three weeks arguing in the synagogue and during that short time had gained a number of converts. However, some opponents stirred up so much trouble for Paul that he had to escape by night. He ended up in Berea, and it is here that the famous verse about the Bereans is to be found. Paul had gone straight to the synagogue when he arrived and discovered that the Bereans were of "more noble character" than the Thessalonians.

Acts 17:11 "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

Clearly, Luke is commending the Bereans in this verse, for they had the sort of attitude that is fitting for all Christians. They were not blindly prejudiced against anything that sounded new to them, nor were they foolishly gullible in accepting any new teaching, but rather they saw the Scriptures as the final and authoritative word and searched them carefully to test Paul's teaching. So those people who call themselves Bereans today are indicating their desire to emulate the Berean attitude - not being prejudiced against new ideas, but making sure to check that they are indeed what the Scripture teaches.

But are the Bereans truly worthy of unreserved praise for their attitude? Is it appropriate that we take their example as a primary vision for our ministries? If we read on, I believe that we see another, not so noble, side to the Bereans.

Acts 17:13 "When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up."

So things quickly changed. As soon as the Thessalonian Jews arrived, they managed to stir up so much opposition that Paul had to leave, and Silas and Timothy followed shortly afterwards. What could explain this sudden change of attitude? If the Bereans were so eager to check things out with Scripture, why were they so quick to turn against Paul? I suggest that their high esteem of Scripture, was matched by their desire to be known as "Scriptural" people, who were unquestionably orthodox in the views of the high ranking Jewish rabbis. Basically, they wanted to earn the praise of these self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy who had come from Thessalonica.

I believe this is an all too easy temptation among evangelicals who consider themselves to be following in the noble line of Bereans. Whilst we claim to be based on the Scripture only, not on traditions nor on the opinions of well-respected theologians, the pressure can be too much to bear when charges of heresy are thrown at us. We must remember that it was the reformer's commitment to Scripture that caused them to promote deeply controversial doctrines. Their determination to use proper exegetical and hermeneutic techniques combined with their faith in the inspiration of Scripture meant that they could have confidence that what they were saying was true.

Of course there is a place for humility. The idea that I am the only one to have correctly understood Scripture and that the majority of interpreters are wrong can be a rather arrogant idea. But when we have done all the analysis and listened carefully to the arguments, are we going to side with the Scripture or the opinions of men? We should not be too quick to condemn original thinking, but

prayerfully return each time to the Scriptures as the Bereans did to "see if what Paul said was true".