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Test Everything. First Presbyterian church of Allegan 8/5/2012. Information Verifiability

I Thess. 5:12-28¹² Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ **Test everything.** Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil. ²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. ²⁵ Brothers, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Acts 17: 1-12

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Christ^[a] had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,^[b]" he said. 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.

⁵ But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the

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crowd.^[c]⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house! They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.”⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil.⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.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.**¹² Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

Please pray with me

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There is no doubt in anyone's minds here today that we are living in the information age: never before in the history of this world has there been so much information available to so many people so quickly and easily.

Just for a moment, consider our world in comparison to the world of the New Testament. Today in the United States, we enjoy a 99 percent literacy rate.ⁱ Almost everyone that you can think of, can read to some extent or another. --This is an entirely different situation than back in first century Palestine which had only a 3 percent literacy rate.ⁱⁱ In Jesus day, being able to read was unusual, and being able to write was even rarer. Writing was an expensive profession reserved for the scribes. Paper and vellum were all hand made, and the books handwritten. Today, books are no longer copied laboriously by scribes by hand. --In our world today, with our printing presses and the ability to print books on demand, our libraries shelves are overflowing with books and in 2011 we were adding books at the rate of over 4,000 books every day.

In addition to an exponentially increasing number of both physical and e-books, during this information age we find ourselves drowning in words and information. We simply can't keep up. How many of us have unread books, unread magazines and unread mail, in addition to unread

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emails, texts, and facebook updates? The internet has become an unending source of information. In 2011, there were over 366 million unique web sites and that number is increasing every single day. Add to that the online news and hundreds of television cable networks, blogs, facebook posts and internet access to radio stations from around the world: ---and the information that bombards us becomes an overwhelming flood of words, facts and data that makes us want to run away from it to the farthest corner of the wilderness!

But even if we resign ourselves to the fact that we can't possibly keep up with all of the data even if we had multiple lifetimes, the bigger and more fundamental question that we are as Christians are thinking about today is the question information verifiability. Or in other words, how can we verify that the information that we are getting is good and true? If anyone can put things up on the internet or self publish their book, how do we know if what they say is reliable or true?

To begin our inquiry, we first need to define what we mean. As Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "what is truth?" This is actually an ancient philosophical question that goes back at least to the classical Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The definition of truth

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that we will use today is that truth is that statement or information that accurately describes the relationship between our thoughts and statements and things, objects and events. Truth is information that is reliable and from a trustworthy source.

Now, many of us in this room were educated back before this information age. In my school, we were taught to write down our quotes and the reference information on index cards while we were reading a book so that we could correctly reference our sources of our truths in our term papers. In our papers, we were graded on how correctly we referenced our source books and we were encouraged and even required seek out the primary sources of authors original author's documents. But just because we used original sources did not mean that all of our sources agreed.

When I was in seminary, one of my favorite classes was with Dr. Kelhoffer on the *Gospel of Mark*. Our assignment in this weekly class was to read one chapter from the book of Mark, 100 or more pages of randomly chosen scholar's commentaries on that chapter, and to write a weekly paper on it. In the paper, we were to summarize what the various scholars had written about that chapter of Mark, point out any discrepancies, and then decide which scholars (if any) we agreed with and why. --We were

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especially encouraged to find the places where the Biblical scholars totally disagreed with each other. --Those were the sections that we would bring up for our lively discussions in class. **The class was fascinating.** Instead of having us only read the scholars that we personally agreed with, Dr. Kelhoffer forced us to think about issues in the Book of Mark from a very wide and very diverse range of theological perspectives. We discovered that all of the scholars brought their own unique worldviews and their own preconceived views of the truth to the text. But instead of simply allowing the different scholars to have their different views in their own commentaries, in our papers we had to decide which Biblical scholar had the better argument and how they had a better handle on the truth.

The class was very eye opening for me. It really helped me to discover some of my own preconceived assumptions and some of my own theological blind spots. And it gave me the very valuable lesson that even those scholars that I completely disagreed with may have a piece of the truth that I may have been missing. I needed to test everything that I read and believed and to be willing to change my mind when I was presented with a better argument with better evidence.

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Now, this is exactly what happened in our scripture passage today. Imagine that you are a good observant Jew, following all of the rules and regulations of the Torah and of your Rabbi in your temple. You live in Thessalonica, one of the biggest cities in Roman Empire, a huge center of trade and power. One day a pair of men named Paul and Silas show up at the Temple. They have this very crazy idea that the Messiah, the Jewish King who was supposed to free the Hebrew people from the oppression of the Romans has already come, that he had died and then had risen from the dead. --They want to prove to you that this Messiah was named Jesus, a young man who was a carpenter from Nazareth. Of course at first you don't believe any such of that kind of nonsense. You are a good Jew who believes and follows all of the Torah! But some of the women and men in the Synagogue are swayed by the arguments. You begin to listen in more closely and to start to think about all of the things that Paul and Silas are saying. You are shocked to realize that their arguments are making a lot of sense. There seems to be some truth in them. Could it be possible that the Messiah had come? Could some or all of this be true? Could the Messiah from the line of David have been a carpenter and not a king stomping out the Roman empire?

Just as you are beginning to believe, some of the leaders of the

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Synagogue began to work their politics and their schemes to try to get Paul and Silas arrested. They had to flee the city in the night for their own safety. The next thing that you heard, Paul and Silas were continuing their teaching in Berea, where the questioning and the discussions were not stopped by the elders in that synagogue. You wonder where all of this testing and questioning will lead your people to in the future. Will the message and the teaching of this Jesus really change the world?

Within our Christian journeys, and with this huge wall of data that is now harassing us, this very same lesson is the one that we should be applying in our faith journeys today. If the people of Thessalonica and Berea had not been willing to question their preconceived notions and all of the theology that they had been taught since they were infants, if they had not listened to Paul and Silas' arguments, churches would not have been established there, and the example of the self sacrificial love of Christ would not have spread to the world. Their willingness to test everything that they heard and to not simply dismiss arguments because they were different led to a huge change of heart in their spiritual lives. It of course wasn't an easy thing for them to do. It is very hard for anyone to listen to

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arguments that they do not agree with and to see things from a new perspective. It is especially a hard thing to do in the established church.

The year was 1616, and Galileo Galilei went to Rome to try to persuade the Catholic church to not ban the ideas of Copernicus. Copernicus was a scholar who had mathematically proven that the earth was in orbit around the sun. That the world that we lived in was not geocentric or earth centered, but heliocentric, or sun centered. It was a difficult argument for Galileo to make. The church believed that the Sun was in movement around the earth. After all, they could see the sun rise in the morning and set every evening! Furthermore, the church cited again their belief in I Chronicles 16:30, which very clearly stated that the “World is firmly established. It cannot be moved.” This scripture and some other references in the Psalms and the account of the Sun standing still in the sky at God’s command were part of the firmly held beliefs of the church in 1616, and nothing that Galileo said convinced them otherwise. At the end of the inquiry, Galileo was censured by the Church. He was told that he could no longer defend or believe “the fiction” that the earth moved around the Sun. Agreeing to do so, Galileo avoided the subject for over a decade before he wrote a book, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World*

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Systems in 1632. The book seemed to make a mockery of some of the questions of the Pope, and Galileo was brought to trial again in Rome in 1633. --This time Galileo was found to be “vehemently suspect of heresy” and he was ordered to “abjure, curse and detest” the “opinion” that the Earth could be in motion around the Sun. His book, and any future books that he would write were banned by the church forever. The inquisition considered burning him alive at the stake but at the end of the trial decided that he was to live under house arrest for the rest of his life.

The churches treatment of Galileo however did not keep their version of the truth from being questioned again. It did not stop others from their own investigations of this Heliocentric “forbidden theory”.

Johannes Kepler, a German mathematician and astronomer was inspired by Galileo to continue his own investigations in to the implications of a Sun centered solar system, and on the basis of Keplers work, the church’s position that the earth could not be moved was weakened even though the church resisted it. A hundred years after the trial of Galileo, two Franciscan priests and mathematicians, Father Le Seur and Father Jacquier were publishing books that assumed that the Earth moved around the Sun. And by the 1800’s, Pope Pius the VII, was allowing books

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advocating this widely accepted truth of the moving earth to be published by the church. But it wasn't until the year 2000 that Pope John Paul II apologized for the actions of the Roman Catholic Church in their trial of the Mathematician Galileo in the 1600's. By holding so stubbornly and firmly to their beliefs, the church was unable to see the truth, even when it was mathematically demonstrated right before them.

In conclusion, while it is easier for us as Christians to ignore the onslaught of all of the new data that is available to us in the information age; and while it may be more comfortable for us to not do the work in thinking through some new theological arguments that are presented to us, this is all part of our calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ. ---We are not to blindly hold on to our truth and close our eyes to new information, but we are to be open to new theological insights and new perspectives that may even challenge our long held preconceived notions. We are not to blindly trust, but we are to test everything that is told to us and not simply keep to what we think we know. As Christians we are called to listen and to test and to challenge and to learn and to grow our faith so that it does not ever become stagnant, but so it can continually grow and become an even better example of the living love of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate

ⁱⁱ [Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine](#)

Hezser, Catherine. *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*. pg. 499

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