

Acts Series Part 60

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Date: 04 September 2011

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[0 : 00] Our faith, the faith that was once for all delivered to us, is under attack on many fronts. We think of our own context here in 21st century Scotland.

Our contention that all are sinners in need of a Savior is deemed a very miserable message. Our claim that the Christian gospel is true and that all other religions are false inasmuch as they cannot provide us a way back to God is rejected as intolerably narrow-minded.

Our conviction that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God is thought laughable if it's even thought about at all. Our insistence that sex is to be enjoyed exclusively within the context of marriage is outdated.

Our recognition that God has determined that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman is dismissed, among other things, as homophobic.

And we could go on. We are variously described as miserable Calvinists, narrow-minded bigots, fanatical fundamentalists, and that is to gloss over the nastier epithets.

[1 : 23] Well, should we be surprised by this? Well, we shouldn't be surprised. The psalms that we have sung today are psalms where the psalmist declares to God and shares how he was the victim of opposition, of violent opposition from the enemies of God.

It is a constant theme in the Scriptures. The passage that we have seen in the book of Acts also presents this occasion when Paul particularly finds himself the victim of attack by the enemies of the gospel.

So, we should not be surprised. But should we be bullied into silence? Well, I think the example of Paul would lead us to declare or to answer that question by no means.

But how are we to defend the faith in a society increasingly hostile to what we believe? I think this evening we can learn from Paul and his defense in Jerusalem as it's recorded for us in the passage that we read.

Now, those of you who have been able to follow the sermons that we've been preaching from Acts will remember that Paul on his way to Jerusalem was being reminded on numerous occasions that on arrival he would be bound and handed over to the Romans.

[2 : 47] There had been various prophetic words declaring that this was what awaited him. And the passage that we've read, a long passage, but to give us the whole picture as it were, relates to us.

The attacks that he was subject to, the odious intentions of certain Jews from Asia who stirred up this murderous mob against Paul.

We have recorded for us his rescue, if you wish, at the hands of the Roman commander who then, of course, bind him and imprison him.

And we are also presented, and this is our particular concern, with his defense. The speech that he delivers in his defense. And that is what we wish to consider.

We'll make reference to other parts of what we've read, but this will be the focus of our attention. Indeed, there in verse 1 of chapter 22, notice how Paul introduces this discourse or this speech before his enemies.

[3 : 49] We read there in verse 1, brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. My defense. The Greek word is one that will be familiar to us, apologia.

We use that word just as it is, even in English today. And, of course, we speak of apologetics as that discipline that is concerned with the defense of the faith.

Well, here Paul introduces what he has to say, describing it as his defense. And, of course, he was in a legal setting, as it were, so there is that legal aspect to it.

And, indeed, as we continue through Acts, as we will do in subsequent weeks, we will find how on a number of occasions he describes the words that he will address in these terms as his defense.

Paul's defense, though delivered in circumstances that may appear very alien and unfamiliar to us, does provide us with crucial lessons how we, in our day and generation, can effectively and confidently engage in apologetics, the defense of the faith, which is a crucial task that we ought to be engaged in.

[5 : 08] I want to briefly, and I will try to be as brief as possible, because if I'm not, then I will not have the time required for what will follow. But I want to briefly mention some characteristics of the attack made against Paul, and not only Paul, but the faith he represents, before moving on to focus our attention on the manner of his defense.

And it will be a concern to identify the manner of his defense more than the actual content of his speech. Now, in order to notice these features of the manner of his defense, we will have to make reference to the content, but the content isn't our primary interest, but the manner of his defense. But before that, we have to just mention, as quickly as we are able, some features of the attack that he is under. If we don't at least have a passing familiarity with that, then it means that a consideration of his defense will be less helpful.

So there in verses 27 to 31, we've already read the verses, we won't read them again, but we have related to us this attack that Paul is subjected to, stirred up by these Jews from the province of Asia. There are three features of this attack that I would just briefly mention. The first one is this, there is underpinning their attack on Paul, the claim that the gospel, this message that he preached, was bad news for society.

[6 : 44] It was bad news. Paul, it was claimed, and we have the very words here before us, Paul was teaching, we're told, against the people, against the law, against this place.

His message was a negative message. It was bad news. We know ourselves, of course, how that completely twisted the truth, that the gospel was good news, literally good news, but the opponents of the gospel, the enemies of the gospel, have as a feature of their attack this contention that the message that Paul brings, far from being good news, was bad news.

It was bad news. And though centuries, indeed millennia, may have passed, that has not changed a great deal. There remains in those who would oppose the gospel this central contention that it is bad news.

What Christians would teach, what they would seek to impose, to use the language that we hear, is bad news. It removes personal freedom. It's judgmental and narrow-minded.

It's sexist and homophobic. It's bad news. It's not good for society. It's not good for Scotland. It's not good for Aberdeen. It's bad news, this message that Christians would seek to present.

[8 : 06] We must leave that behind. We must move on to a better, brighter future. Let's leave behind this bad news that we've been saddled with as a society for far too long.

That's one aspect or one feature of the attack. Another feature of the attack is that it is based on an ancient principle of not letting the truth get in the way of a good accusation.

Never let the truth get in the way of a good accusation. What we have here on the part of these Jews from Asia and those they managed to stir up on their side, what we have here is not reasoned debate where certain basic ground rules of decency and honesty are respected.

Their fundamental objection that we've already noticed that Paul was teaching against the people, against Moses, against the temple. That was false. But then their specific illustration is fabricated.

This illustration of Paul's disdain for the temple, which was the claim that his friend Trophimus, who was a Gentile, had entered into a part of the temple that was not open to Gentiles.

[9 : 20] It was false. It simply hadn't happened. And yet, let's not allow the truth to get in the way of a good accusation. This is something that will help us in our intention of doing harm and damage to Paul.

So let's just say it's true, even though it is not true. Now it would seem, by the manner in which it's described to us, that in their enthusiasm for having found something to use against him, they're not actually fabricating this.

They were just criminally careless in not checking their facts. In verse 29, there's a kind of an explanatory note where we read, they had previously, that is, these Jews from Asia, they had previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, in the city with Paul, and assumed that Paul had brought him into the Templarium.

So it would seem they didn't actually make this up in some devious, deliberate way. They had seen something and they thought, well, it would appear that this is what Paul is doing. Well, we'll grab

hold of that and use that to accuse him.

Never let the truth get in the way of a good accusation. Lies are the common currency of the enemies of the gospel. Now that ought not to surprise us, for the enemies of the gospel have their Father, as we who have deposited our faith in Jesus Christ have our Father, our Father in heaven. [10:46] So those who are enemies of the gospel have their Father, and their Father is the devil. Of course, such a suggestion would also be deemed utterly ridiculous by many, but that is the reality, and their Father is the Father of lies.

So it ought not to surprise us that those who would attack the gospel would use as one of their weapons lies. This has always been so.

We have heard and we are familiar with some of the lies that are thrown in our direction. We're told that the Bible is full of contradictions. We're told that it's full of sexist and homophobic ideas. We're told that Christians are a nasty piece of work intent on imposing their bigoted ideas on an unsuspecting population. Just to illustrate with one current example, some of you will have noticed and been familiar with the vitriol that was showered on the MSP John Mason for tabling a motion at the Scottish Parliament that sought to protect churches from ever having to be obliged to perform same-sex marriages.

Now, leaving aside the tactical issue of whether that was a sensible thing to do at this particular juncture and all the rest of it, I'm not interested in that. What I'm interested in is the attack that he was subject to for even suggesting this in the public arena.

[12:15] And his own colleagues, his own colleagues from his own party describing him as bigoted and small-minded and no doubt other adjectives were used.

Never let the truth get in the way of a good accusation. But there's a third feature of this attack that I want to just notice before moving on to Paul's defense. And that is, in a sense, what we've said already probably covers it, but this attack was nasty and intolerant.

The Jews from Asia hated Paul and their objective was not to win an intellectual argument, but to silence and destroy him and his message. And this is the irony that characterizes much of the attack in the Christian faith, and not all those who would attack or question the truth of the Christian faith, but that would characterize some of those who do so.

The irony is that our great sin, if we can call it that, is said to be our intolerance. We are so intolerant, insisting on our views and our truth and not tolerating others who think differently.

And yet, many of those who attack the faith have as their desired outcome the complete removal from the public square of any voice for the gospel.

[13:34] But what of Paul's defense? Well, Paul's defense is actually two-pronged. There is the speech that he delivers, which we will be considering and is our primary concern, but there is also, and time may not allow us to even mention this in any detail, there is also the rights that he demands.

He defends himself in these two ways, by the speech he delivers and by the rights he demands. But as I say, his speech is what we will consider now and will occupy perhaps all the time that we have left to us.

Now, as I've already mentioned, we will not dwell primarily on the content of his speech, which is largely repetition of material that we have already found in Acts.

It is autobiographical. It is Paul giving his testimony, if you wish, of his life and conversion. So, the data is familiar to us.

We've already come across it in chapter 9, and indeed it will come up again in Paul's defense before Agrippa. But we do want to draw some lessons from the manner in which he defends himself in this speech.

[14:45] And our concern is practical. It is that we would learn the lessons and that learning those lessons, we would be better able to stand up for our faith where we are, where you are.

And in this delivery of this speech, there are five aspects of it that I want us to notice. Now, before identifying those five aspects, there is one, if you wish, painfully obvious yet crucial point that we have to stress, and it is this, that Paul does speak.

Before thinking about how he speaks and how he delivers this defense, simply to make the point that he does speak. He doesn't remain silent. If we consider just the circumstances that he finds himself in, this vicious, violent mob that are seeking his death, it's a chaotic scene that is painted for us.

As we imagine that, or as we try and visualize that, it's clearly the case that Paul, in his own mind, as he considered, what do I do? Do I speak or do I remain silent?

As he debated that in his mind, as I imagine he did, I'm sure he could have made, in his own mind, a cast iron argument for the wisdom of keeping his mouth shut. What's the point of speaking to this mob?

[16:03] What's the point of even trying to address them and argue with them? They clearly aren't prepared to listen. Look at the way they behave. Perhaps it's best to remain silent.

But he does not remain silent. He speaks. And that in itself serves as a challenge to us. What about us? We are often told, maybe as we grow up as children, and the advice is sound advice, even when we're older, we're told to think twice before speaking.

That often is sound advice. But I wonder, in this matter of standing up for the faith, would it not be more relevant for us to be encouraged to think twice before not speaking?

I think not speaking is often our default position. And I think the example of Paul is that speaking should be the base case while recognizing that there will be occasions when it is more prudent or wise to say nothing or not to speak.

Paul does speak, and that in itself is significant. But what about this speech? Five features of it. The first thing I want us to notice is that this speech is delivered with authority.

[17:14] Notice there in verse 40, having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them, and then the speech follows.

Now we can read that verse and pass on to the next one and think nothing of it. They're details. They're details concerning how he secured the opportunity to speak and, well, how he begins to speak.

Let's move on to what he says. But this verse and what it states is really remarkable. Again, if you try on the basis of the material we have before us, which is very significant and detailed, imagine the scene.

And as you imagine the scene, I think you'll come to the same conclusion as I do that this is quite remarkable, what is being said here. Quite remarkable that Paul is able to stand up before this high-octane, vicious, violent mob, baying for his blood, is able with a gesture, by motioning to them, it would seem that the reference is to a hand gesture of some kind.

He raises his hand to indicate that he has something to say. And with this simple gesture, this vicious, violent, chaotic mob is reduced, if that's the right way of putting it, to complete silence.

[18:42] He motioned to the crowd when they were all silent. The ESV puts it rather more vividly, there was a great hush. So this is the man that they've been trying to kill.

This is the crowd of which it is said there in verse 35, when Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great, he had to be carried by the soldiers.

And yet, Paul, the one they're trying to kill, all he does is raise his hand, and there is a great hush. How do we understand this? It doesn't surprise me that those who approach the Scriptures not persuaded as to its reliability conclude that, well, this didn't happen.

This just doesn't ring true. Mobs don't operate in this way. You don't simply raise your hand to a mob baying for your blood, and they all remain quiet, and there's a great hush.

That just doesn't ring true. And I'm sympathetic to those who would say this doesn't ring true. But, of course, we believe that this is exactly what happened as it is recorded for us in Scripture.

[19:53] So what is happening? That's really what I want to get to. Well, maybe I could put it this way. What does this remind you of? Or perhaps I could put it a different way.

Who does this remind you of? Paul standing up, raising his hand, and there is a great hush. Who does that remind you of? Does that not remind you of occasions in the Gospels when there were those opposing our Lord, and yet in a remarkable, supernatural way, He is able to command their attention.

He's able to pass through them, or whatever the example we choose to fix our attention on. There was, was there not in the Lord an authority that He commanded, even in the face of His enemies. And it is this same kind of authority, I think we discover here, that is presented to us here. The authority that Paul enjoys, that allows him by the simple gesture of his hand to quieten this violent crowd, is the authority of the one seated on high, is the authority of the Savior whose gospel he proclaims, that is found in him by the Spirit of God.

He delivers this defense with authority. And as we think of ourselves, is it the case, or can we draw from this example, this incident, can we draw from this incident that whenever we are faced with those who are opposing the gospel, perhaps in some verbal dialogue, or who are speaking against a truth that we hold dear, and we would seek to respond to them, is it the case that they will always listen quietly and respectfully to what we have to say?

[21 : 44] Is this what we can draw from this? Well, I would say two things. The first thing I would say that we can draw from this authority that Paul had evidently had in himself that allows him to quieten the crowd in this way, the first thing we can say is that Paul, before he is, I think I would use the term, granted this authority, before that happens, he has already decided, in the midst of all the chaos, to speak up.

He doesn't wait for some sign, he doesn't wait for the crowd to be hushed, and then say, oh, well, oh, maybe I could speak. No, he's decided to speak. Even in the midst of the chaos, even in the midst of the seeming impossibility of what he's proposing, yet he says, no, I will speak.

And having decided to speak, having taken upon himself this courageous decision, then God intervenes, as it were, and grants to him this audience who would be in a position to listen to what he has to say.

And then, perhaps another thing I would say is that the manner in which God grants to us authority as we would speak for him, as we would speak in defense of the gospel, doesn't follow a set pattern.

So it will not always be as dramatic as what is presented to us here. It won't always mean that everybody remains quiet. It won't always mean that things go as we would like them to go.

[23 : 18] But it remains true that if we are speaking on behalf of the king, of whom we are ambassadors, then we speak with a God-given authority.

And the manner in which we speak should reflect our conviction that we enjoy a God-given authority. And so when you would speak in defense of the faith, maybe it's on a Radio Scotland phone-in, or maybe it's in an email you address to your MP, maybe it's in a letter to the Press and Journal, maybe it's in a workplace conversation, remember that you speak not on your own authority, but vested with the authority of the king on behalf of whom you speak.

Paul delivers his defense with authority. But there is a second aspect of his delivery that I want us to notice, and much more briefly, almost in passing, but important all the same.

He delivers his defense with courtesy, with authority, but also with courtesy. There is he begins his defense in verse 1 of chapter 22.

Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. He's addressing the very men who have been trying to kill him, the very men who have been speaking ill of him, the very men who have been lying about him, the very men who have been defaming his character, and yet how does he address them?

[24 : 43] Does he address them with their own language? Does he respond in kind to the way in which they would speak of him? No. With courtesy, he addresses them, brothers and fathers.

Listen now to my defense. I don't think it's necessary to dwell on the application of that to ourselves as we would speak in defense of the gospel.

So, his delivery is with authority, with courtesy, but moving on, we can see also that his defense is delivered with sensitivity. When I speak of sensitivity, I'm speaking of something quite distinct from courtesy.

They may seem somewhat related, but I have in mind something quite distinct. What do I mean by saying that his defense is delivered with sensitivity? Well, it's to recognize that Paul was sensitive to his audience, to who were in front of him.

He was sensitive to who they were. He was sensitive to the language that they spoke, to the concerns that they had, and indeed to the common ground that there was between him and them.

[25 : 51] They seemed so diametrically opposed, and yet Paul is able to identify common ground that he shares with his audience, and he is sensitive to that. Much is made, and indeed the text itself makes something of the fact that in his address, he addresses them in Aramaic, in a language that they were familiar with, and that in some way would perhaps generate a measure of sympathy for what he had to say.

And you might say, well, that's hardly greatly significant, but interestingly, Luke himself identifies it as in a measure significant, because there in verse 2, we read, when they heard him speak to them

in Aramaic, they became very quiet, even more quiet, presumably, than they already were.

So, Paul is concerned to speak to them in a manner that they can understand, in the language that they would be familiar with. He is sensitive to them at that level.

But more importantly, he addresses their concerns. Paul could have said, well, these accusations that they make, they are so demonstrably false, they're so evidently grounded in a hatred of me, they're so intellectually bankrupt, then why should I even waste my breath on such people and such foolish accusations?

I have more important things to do than to respond to such men. But no, Paul is prepared to address their concerns. Remember that they accused him of teaching against our people and our law and this place, that is the temple.

[27 : 21] And he addresses those accusations by establishing his guilt-edged Jewish credentials. Time doesn't allow us to notice how he does that, but we've read the passage.

Indeed, the straw that broke the camel's back, as it were, in terms of these men seeking to accuse Paul, was the Trophimus incident of the supposed guilt of Paul in allowing Trophimus into a part of the temple that he ought not to have been in.

And yet it's interesting that Paul is, it would seem, even sensitive to this accusation, though he doesn't respond to it specifically.

It's not worthy of a specific response. Nonetheless, it is interesting that in presenting his testimony, and very particularly in presenting his calling on the part of the Lord to the Gentiles, he doesn't make reference to how that occurred on or at the time of his conversion, when we read in Acts chapter 9 that when he meets with Ananias, it is made evident that this is his primary calling as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Rather, he relates the occasion many years later when he was in Jerusalem in the temple. You know, in the temple, the very temple that he is accused of profaning, and when he gives his testimony, he says, it was in Jerusalem in the temple.

[28 : 43] When I was praying to your God, to our God, it was there that the Lord spoke to me and sent me as an apostle to the Gentiles, even though I argued with him and said, no, would I not be better off here in Jerusalem?

There in the temple, I was sent to the Gentiles. He is, it would seem, in the measure that it is possible to do, he is addressing the concerns that they have.

He attempts to occupy what common ground exists, and there are many examples, but we limit ourselves to a couple. Notice there how at the beginning of his speech, he speaks of how the zeal that he has for God is one that, in a sense, he shares with them.

There in verse 3, I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in the city under Gamaliel. I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.

He says, I recognize your zeal for God. I recognize it. I too. I too was zealous for God, just as you are. And so, in this way, as it were, he finds some common ground that would at least allow him to speak a little longer as they are able to identify with them in this manner.

[30 : 06] Notice also how he interestingly presents Ananias. as he speaks of his conversion, and as he speaks of how he met with this man Ananias. Notice how Paul is very careful to describe Ananias in a way that we don't find him described in the account in Acts chapter 9.

He's described by Paul to this Jewish audience. He's described by as a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. You know, clearly, Paul's concern is that they would be drawn in by this, that they would be impressed by this.

They would, in a sense, be more sympathetic to what he has to say because one of the men, instrumental in his change of direction, was this respected Jew, very zealous for the law, a devout observer of the law.

And we could multiply the examples. The basic point and the principle we're trying to establish is that Paul delivers his defense with sensitivity to the audience he is addressing.

And so we too, we must know our audience, who it is we're speaking to, who we would have read that letter, who it is, who our MP is that we're writing to, what views do they hold, what would be the most appropriate, wisest, most prudent way to address the concern that we have given who it is that we are speaking to or addressing.

[31 : 28] Where are they coming from? Indeed, what unites us? What common ground might we be able to find? He delivers his defense with sensitivity. He delivers his defense also with courage.

In chapter 22 and verses 21 and 22, we're coming here to the very end of his speech as long as he is allowed to speak as it were.

Notice there in verse 21, Then the Lord said to me, Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles. This is him recalling the occasion in the temple when in an ecstatic state the Lord reveals himself in this manner and gives him this direction.

Now why do I say delivered with courage? Really the point I'm making is that his sensitivity that we've just noted should not be confused with crowd-pleasing. Where he can please, if we can use that verb, he is willing to do so.

But when it is necessary to offend or when it is necessary to say something that will be offensive, then he does not hold back. Paul knew that when he spoke of the Lord sending him to the Gentiles, this would be like a red rag to a bull, and yet he is prepared to live with the consequences of that.

[32 : 48] He is prepared to deliver this defense with courage, even though he is very aware of what will be the outcome of this reference to him being sent as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Now the question might be asked, why was this such a big deal for the Jews? I think for the Jews who were listening to him in their eyes from their perspective, proselytism, that is making Gentiles into Jews, that was fine.

But evangelism, making Gentiles into Christians without first making them Jews, this was to them an abomination. It was tantamount to saying that the Jews and Gentiles were equal, for they both needed to come to God through Christ and on identical terms, and this they could not abide by. But of course for Paul, even as we were considering this morning, this was central to his conception of the gospel. So he could not soft-pedal this truth simply because those who were listening would not be approving of what he had to say.

So again, the principle there for us, yes, by all means let's be sensitive, by all means let's avoid unnecessary offense, but nonetheless there will be occasions when what we say and what we have to say will be offensive.

[34 : 08] Not that it is intrinsically offensive, but it will be offensive to our hearers. If that is so, so be it. We certainly need wisdom to maintain that careful balance between sensitivity and courage.

But finally, in Paul's delivery of his defense, delivered with authority, delivered with courtesy, with sensitivity, with courage, but finally, this defense is delivered with intent.

Now what do I mean by that? Well, presumably Paul, whenever he spoke, he spoke with intent, with purpose. The point that I want to make is simply this, that his intent or purpose on this occasion is greater than a mere defense vis-à-vis the accusations that have been leveled against him.

Indeed, he doesn't address many of the accusations. They're not worthy of being addressed and so he simply ignores them. Indeed, the man who is present there that would be most able to defend him doesn't even understand what he says.

The commander. The commander would have been totally oblivious to what he was saying, unlikely to have understood what Paul had said, and yet he was the very man who could have secured his protection.

[35 : 23] So, his concern really isn't to defend himself or his physical integrity, though he does respond in a general way to the concerns of his audience.

His purpose and his intent goes way beyond his own defense, his own security, his own physical integrity. His intent, at heart, is to communicate to these people the gospel.

That is his primary concern. He wants them to know of this righteous one who has come to save sinners.

He wants them to know of this one who died and rose again and who speaks from heaven. He wants them to know of the one who can forgive sins, the one who can call men and women to his royal service.

And so, in all that he says, he speaks of these things. And of course, he speaks to those he knows so well because he was just like them. Just like them.

[36 : 22] He knows where they're coming from. He knows of their zeal and his great concern is that they too, like he was able, to have his eyes open and to see the glory of the risen Christ.

Surely it is his great desire above all else, even if he doesn't explicitly state it, that they too would see, that they too at least would be given the opportunity to hear of this Messiah.

This is his great intent, his great purpose, and there too, time doesn't allow us to develop this any further. But there too is a lesson for us. As we would speak up for the truth, ultimately our concern is

not to win a debate.

It's not to beat somebody else, to have better arguments that will show somebody else up or humiliate somebody else. That's not our concern. Our concern is that they too would know the Savior we know.

That they too would be persuaded that this gospel that we proclaim is true, that this Word of God that we speak of is indeed the Word of God. That is our greatest and deepest concern.

[37 : 21] Paul delivers his defense then in these different ways, and I think in these ways there are lessons for us.

Time doesn't allow us to mention the fact that another prong of his defense was his claiming of the rights that he had. We've read the passage and you're familiar with how he makes reference to his Roman citizenship and demands the rights that would go with that.

Indeed, the right that he demands to speak is one that is interesting and that could be developed, but in his defense he is not slow to demand the rights that he has as a citizen.

We too, we are citizens of this nation. We have rights, and we should not be bullied into imagining that we don't have a right to speak, that we don't have a right to an opinion, we don't have a right to a place in the public square.

We too have a right, and we should demand those rights and make use of them in the manner that Paul does and in the way and following some of the principles that we discover even on this occasion.

[38 : 26] So as we conclude, our faith is being attacked, and we as those who are followers of the way, we are called by our God to raise our voice in defense of the faith.

May God help us so to do. Let us pray. ■■■■■■ difficulty monkey■ seja for a monkey at garam by