



UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World, Part 8

Making a Difference Means Making Disciples —
Acts 17:1–15 | Tim Badal | November 11, 2018



We're in a series in Acts titled "Unstoppable," which is the second part of our study of Acts. Our first part last year was called "Unfinished," where we learned that the work of the church was left unfinished. That means we need to pick up that mantle in the 21st century here in the Fox Valley area to impact people for the cause of Jesus Christ. As we enter that unfinished work, we can have confidence because our gospel is unstoppable.

We're learning this as we've moved into the second half of Acts, looking at the ministry of Paul through his three missionary journeys. While the world and the devil and evil men sought to do everything they could to stop the cause of Christ, nothing was able to stop it. Does that mean we won't suffer? No, we will suffer. We will have hardships. We will see persecution. But the gospel will never be thwarted or stopped. It was Jesus Who said, "I'm going to build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:13–19). We can have boldness and confidence that when we share the gospel of Jesus Christ, just as in the book of Acts, lives will be changed.

Acts 16 told about the ministry in Philippi during Paul's second missionary journey. Paul and Silas and their new convert Timothy, along with Luke, who wrote Acts, made up a team that headed out from Antioch in modern-day Syria across the Aegean Sea and into what is now modern-day Greece. They went to the city of Philippi, where they preached the gospel, resulting in the conversion of a successful business woman named Lydia.

After that, they exorcised a demon, allowing a slave girl to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through her healing. Then we saw them get beaten and thrown into jail for preaching Christ. But as they were singing praises, God used an earthquake to free them from the jail. As a result, the jailer, whose job it was to secure their imprisonment, was himself actually set free through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After this the local magistrates discovered that they had flogged and imprisoned Roman citizens, something that could have gotten them in a lot of trouble. You don't abuse Roman citizens. So they sent word to Paul and Silas that they needed to leave the city. As a result, Paul and Silas moved on to other places to continue their ministry. This is where we'll pick up the story today, beginning in Acts 17:1:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

¹⁰ The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹² Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. ¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

This story records their ministry in two different cities: Thessalonica and Berea. If we look at the map again, we'll see that they started in Antioch of Syria. From there they traveled through Galatia, which is modern-day Turkey, and eventually departed from the port city of Troas across the Aegean Sea to the island of Samothrace, then to Neapolis and finally to Philippi in Acts 16.

In chapter 17 they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia to the city of Thessalonica. We're not told of any ministry that took place in Amphipolis or Apollonia. It seems they wanted to get to Thessalonica, probably because at that time it was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire.

It was a coastal city that had been founded by Alexander the Great, who named it after his half-sister—who then became his wife. Thessalonica was established four centuries before Paul and his team arrived there. We're told it had about 200,000 inhabitants—about the size of Aurora—when Paul arrived there.



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Thessalonica was well known for all kinds of debauchery and sin, and also for the worship of all kinds of gods. One of the reasons Greek mythology was so big in that city was that it was in the shadow of Mt. Olympus, where they believed the gods resided. Some of the best opportunities to see Mt. Olympus were in that city. Even now you can visit Thessalonica, which is still the second largest city in Greece, just after Athens. About 300,000 people call it home today.

Paul and Silas spent three weeks in Thessalonica, then after they were kicked out, they traveled southwest about 45 miles to the small town of Berea. Notice in Acts 17:6 what the people of Thessalonica had heard about Paul even before he arrived there. The word was this: *"These men...have turned the world upside down."* How awesome would it be if that's what we as a church were known for? In order for us to turn the world upside down, we need to first realize that the world needs to be turned upside down. Some of us don't think that way. Some of us think the world we live in is okay—in fact, it's a good place to live. While there is some truth to that, as Christians we can see that in fact the world isn't in a good place and it needs to be flipped upside down. Its ways, thoughts, desires, and pursuits run contrary to what God wants. As Christians, we preach the gospel because we know the world needs to be turned over.

When we believe this, it results in a holy discontent with our life as we know it. We understand that the world needs to be changed—and in fact, we have been sent as ambassadors for Christ Jesus to change the world. As leaders in this church, we ask ourselves this question: if our church ceased to exist, would the community around us notice? Would they feel it? Would there be any sense of loss? Sadly, in our world today, there are many churches that could close up shop today and nobody would notice, because they're not impacting the community. They're not engaging the community around them. As a church, we need to be constantly asking these questions, because we want to be changing the world. We want to be known as people who are turning the world upside down.

Now, there are different ways to garner the attention of a watching world. Some churches do it through their buildings. They build monstrosities—multi-million-dollar buildings that are testimonies to the organization spending a whole lot of cash. When you drive by these places, you say, "Wow, look at that place. Something is going on there—but I'm not sure what." Other churches decide to make their name in the world by finding a celebrity pastor and pasting his name and face all over town. Instead of talking about what they're doing as a church or who is being changed in the church, they talk about their leader. Still others are known for their programs.

I have an out-of-state friend who is not a believer who talks about a church near him that hosts the biggest and most dramatic Christmas and Easter presentations, drawing people from far and wide. For him, that's what church is. Churches can also be known for programs, such as a big youth group or their children's ministry.

Maybe you've been attending our church for a while and you're wondering, "What are they doing here anyway?" We're not here to build buildings. Quite frankly, they aren't all that important to us. All a building is to us is a place to do ministry. And I promise you the last thing we want to do is elevate this ugly mug around town. It's not about me. The Bible tells us God will use anything, including donkeys and Tim Badals, to further His gospel. The spotlight here should not be on me or anyone else.

Also, for us, it's not about our programs. If our programs are about what we're doing and not what God is doing, then we've got the wrong kind of programs.

So what are we about? How are we going to turn the world upside down? As pastors and as a church, we believe the way we make a difference is by making disciples. It's not very flashy and it doesn't happen very quickly. But it's the model Paul gave us in Thessalonica and Berea. He showed us that we impact the world by causing people to become followers of Jesus Christ, helping them grow, then sending them out to do God's work in the world.

We will do this through the three elements in our mission statement. Village Bible Church exists to discover, develop, and deploy disciples who are all in, not only here but all over the world. That's what we're here for and that's how we evaluate all our ministries, our buildings, and how we use our finances. How are we discovering, developing, and deploying disciples who will turn the world upside down for Christ? That's exactly what we see in Thessalonica and Berea, which makes me as your pastor very happy. We're doing what the Lord wants us to do.

Discovering disciples in the world

Churches that make a difference are active in discovering disciples in the world. We're told that when Paul entered a city, he did something we might not notice or think about. But because we miss this, we can run the risk of missing how we are to discover people for the cause of Christ. We read in Acts 17:2-3:

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

This discovery involves engaging the community.

How do we get to the place where we can tell the world that Jesus is the Christ? The first thing we have to do is to engage the community around us. Don't miss the subtle phrase, "*And Paul went in...*" He went into the city. He didn't go around the city. He didn't go to that part of the city where all the Christians were. He first went into the city—which he did not only in Thessalonica, but also in Berea and Athens and Corinth. Once he got into a city, he engaged the community he found there.

One of the great cancers that is eating away at the evangelical church is our move toward escapism. We are avoiding involvement in the world. We can be more concerned about our own purity and holiness than we are about making a difference in the world. I agree, getting close to the world can corrupt us. But this mindset in and of itself is foreign to the book of Acts.

Rather, we see repeatedly that Paul and the other missionaries did not separate themselves from the community but engaged the people in their everyday lives. This should become our practice as well. We as a staff don't want to make you so busy with activities here at the church that you have no time to go out into your communities. If we withdraw from the world, it will remain lost and without hope. Yes, it's important to engage in church life, particularly in three areas: worship on Sunday, some level of service in or through the church, and participation in a weekly small group. That's what we ask our members to do. Beyond these, we want you to engage with the people in your community.

This should include activities that might not seem especially spiritual. We want you to coach the baseball, soccer, or football teams. We want you to be the class mom for the school party. We want you to be part of community leadership, such as the village board or the library board. I myself am on the school board in our local school district. Why? Because I have so much free time? Absolutely not. I do it because it gives me an opportunity to be a light in the world around me. It forces me to stay involved with my community. We should never view our communities with suspicion and withdraw from them. Until we engage them, we'll not have the opportunity to share with them the good news of Jesus Christ.

Paul went into the city and we need to go in as well. When he went in, he also had a plan. Right away, Paul headed to the synagogue. Why did he do that? Because the synagogue was the place where people gathered who already had a biblical and theological

foundation. These were people who did not believe in multiple gods, which was the prevalent view in most of Greece. These were people who believed in and worshiped the one God—Yahweh, Jehovah. Yet they did not know about or believe in Jesus. Paul saw these people as “low hanging fruit.” He knew he could engage them in conversation about Christ by showing them through the Old Testament Scriptures that the Messiah they were waiting for had already come.

There are people in our lives as well who are sitting in the synagogues of our world. These might include those who have attended church in the past or people who generally affirm there is a God. But they might still be far from knowing Jesus through salvation. That’s what makes Christmas such a good time to spread the gospel. As a society, we still have an affection for the Christmas story which directly involves Jesus.

Yes, we are currently experiencing something of a “war on Christmas.” But our stores are still playing Christmas carols. Like Paul, we can still share Christ based on what people already know. We can tell them the real reason Christmas is being celebrated—His name is Jesus. “Can I share with you what ‘We Three Kings’ is talking about? Do you want to know what ‘Away in the Manger’ is about? Do you know what ‘Silent Night, Holy Night’ means? Do you wonder why we sing ‘Joy to the World?’”

This is our low-hanging fruit—and it’s not just found at Christmas time. We can also engage people around their felt needs.

This discovery involves establishing points of contact.

One of the ways people in our small group have found opportunities for conversation is simply by asking people, “Can I pray for your need right now?” Approaches like this establish a connecting point with people. We can pray, “Lord, how are You leading this person to Yourself?” Then the person sitting in the cubicle next to you says, “I have a doctor’s appointment and I’m scared to go. I have some troubling symptoms.” You could easily stop your work and ask, “Can I pray for you right now? I believe God can help you.”

I’ve done that lots of times and no one has ever responded, “How dare you ask me that?” It’s never happened. A lot of people really want prayer. You’re not asking them to join you. All you’re communicating is that they matter to you and you want to take their need before the God you love and worship. You’re not asking them to believe like you do. You’re just telling them you believe Jesus can help them.

This will reveal to them the reality of your relationship with God, then they might become curious to know more. They might think, “Here is someone who has peace and joy and hope—and those are things I really want as well. Here is someone who acts as though they are loved.” Through your simple prayer, you are introducing them to what a relationship with Jesus looks like. There are a lot of different points of contact we can make with the unbelieving world that can give them hope that there is a God Who is real.

This discovery involves explaining the Scriptures.

You might be heavily involved in your community, and you may have created points of contact with a number of people who connect their everyday lives with spiritual things. This is what Jesus did with the woman at the well. He took an ordinary situation and moved it into a spiritual interaction. But step one and step two need to lead to a third step, as Paul modeled for us. Acts 17 goes on to say he “*reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.*”

If we’re going to discover disciples in this world, at some point we’ve got to share the good news of Jesus Christ. At some point we have to stop just being the good Christian who does nice things and who prays nice prayers for people. We must actually tell people, “I need you to know the reason for my hope, joy, and peace. It’s because I have a relationship with Jesus Christ. I realized I was a sinner in need of God’s grace.” We can then show them how we found this in Scripture. We can also explain to them that the reason the world is filled with pain and sorrow is because we turned away from almighty God, going our way instead of His. Once they understand this, then they will understand why Jesus came to die in our place. We can say, “I have now given my life to Christ and you are invited to do the same. That’s how you can know the same peace and joy and love I’ve experienced.” Sometimes we get to that point in our conversations, but then we stop.

The people in Thessalonica, to whom Paul would later write two of his letters, would never have come together as a church if Paul had stopped with the first two steps. Engaging a community and establishing contact are not in themselves enough. We also have to explain the gospel through the Scriptures. Paul did this through reasoning with the people in the synagogues. The word “reason” implies a dialog. Paul was not standing up and preaching a great oratorical speech or persuasive apologetic. He was simply

engaging the people in ongoing conversation. They might have been sitting at a table around a meal, day after day. The goal of these conversations was to explain the Scriptures, then to prove from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

We need to tell our friends, "Here's what God's Word says to you." Then using both the Bible and our own testimony, we give them reasons why the gospel is true. This literally brings the person to whom we're speaking closer to the Word. Our job as witnesses and as ambassadors for the gospel is to take the friend or neighbor or acquaintance at work closer to God's Word. It's not our job to change their minds—that's the work of God's Spirit. Our job is to get them close to the Scriptures. As an employer, I talk with my employees about the Bible. I don't beat them over the head with it. Rather, I make them more aware of what it teaches—and I'm seeing that little by little it's starting to work.

Last week we had a guest in our church who is on a journey, trying to understand the claims and call of Jesus Christ. He told me when he first attended some months ago, he thought, "You've got my wife, but you'll never get me." Then last week, after hearing the message, he said, "We've got to talk. Can I come over around 9:00 tonight?" Then for two hours at my dining room table, we dialoged about the things of the Lord. We opened the Word. He had questions. We went back and forth. I would answer a question and he would have another. Did he become a follower of Jesus Christ that night? No. Is he closer? You'd better believe it. He told me, "I'm right there." Should I tell him, "You're too late—the blue light special is over"? Or do I say, "Let's keep talking."

Brothers and sisters, we have opportunities to draw people close to the Scriptures. This is important. If you engage your community or the world apart from a deep relationship with the Word of God, you will draw them to worldly Christianity. What will then happen is the world will tell them what to do. We need to have a relationship, not only with the world, but also with the Word. Our job is to bring the world to the Word. When we do that, we're doing evangelism. If you think hanging out and partying with your friends and just "meeting them where they're at" is enough, you're being a worldly Christian, something the Bible tells us to flee from. We're told that bad company corrupts good character (1 Corinthians 15:32–24).

That doesn't mean we should not evangelize. But when we engage with the world, we have to have God's Word in our heads and in our hearts, so we don't fall prey to the world's lures and deceptions. We also need to have God's Word because that's what the world needs to hear.

Developing disciples through the Word.

The only way we can discover disciples in the world is if we develop disciples who love the Word. Let's look ahead to the experience Paul and Silas had in Berea, where they went after being run out of Thessalonica by a mob who hated the gospel. When they arrived, again they went into the Jewish synagogue. We read in Acts 17:11–12, *"Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men."*

Luke is telling us that in Berea, the people were "more noble" than the people in Thessalonica. He wasn't talking about their educational levels or their financial status. Rather, these people were commended for their relationship with the Scriptures. This is what I want our church to be known for as well, rather than for our programs or our building or our celebrity pastor who preaches great sermons (as if we were at risk for that, by the way). I want us to be known as a church that knows and loves and trusts the Scriptures.

One of the greatest compliments I've gotten from guest speakers is, "Man, that's a hot group out there." He's not talking about your looks. He's saying you're on fire for the truth of God. There's nothing a preacher appreciates more than a captivated audience who is ready to receive what he says.

That describes the Bereans. They were excited to hear Paul's message and they wanted to study it more deeply. We will not fulfill our mission to develop disciples unless we are able to convince them to love the Word of God.

Let's look at some characteristics of the Bereans.

Growth happens as we approach God's Word openly.

First, the Bereans came into their worship gathering wanting to be changed by what they would hear. They said, "I'm expecting to come in to worship today as one person and leaving as a different person."

Let me ask: did you come here this morning with an expectation of hearing from God about some changes you need to make to become more like Him? This requires preparation. This is easier for you than those in the early service. I hammered them about

the probability that the only thing they thought about before church was getting that cup of coffee. But what about you? Do you come here with a sense that you would be changed by the Word of God today?

The Bereans were open, fertile ground to receive instruction. They wanted to learn something they hadn't known before about God, about themselves, and about their mission in this world.

Growth happens as we approach God's Word eagerly.

The Bereans were excited. How many of you right now are wishing this were over? Now, I know you won't admit it, much less raise your hand, but how many of you have already "checked out" on this sermon? "It's gone too long. It's boring. He's not making any sense. I don't need this." If you're not a Christian, you have every right to say these things and I won't be offended. But if you say you love Jesus and have put your hope in Him, both in this world and in the world to come, then coming to a service that is focused on Him should be something you eagerly receive.

It would be like me going to an awards ceremony for my wife, where people would be giving her accolades. I'm sitting with her at the head table as person after person speaks of what a great mom she is, what a great wife she is, what a great Christian she is or neighbor she is. What would it be like if I just threw up my arms and said, "Enough already! I don't want to hear about this lady any more. Haven't we heard enough? Who cares?" Can you see the problem? How can I say I love her and not relish the compliments she receives?

I want to be really honest with you this morning. Some of you say you love Jesus, but you can't stand more than ten minutes of hearing about Him? There's something wrong with your love, and with my love, when things said about the person we love bore us to death. We must be careful.

The Bereans eagerly wanted to hear the Word of God. They came prepared and ready to receive His Word, because they wanted to know what God's love letter to them said.

Growth happens as we approach God's Word carefully.

The Bereans also searched the Scriptures carefully. They heard what Paul said, then they went home to look into it for themselves. They wanted to verify Paul's claim that the Old Testament Scriptures supported his teaching that Jesus was the Messiah. Since none of them probably had the written Word, they gathered in groups to discuss what they knew about the Scriptures.

"What was that psalm again—Psalm 22—that spoke of the Savior suffering? He would even say, 'My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?' What does Isaiah 53 say? Does anyone remember? Oh, it says He was a lamb going to slaughter. Paul told us Jesus was a Lamb Who went to the slaughter. It was Jesus on the cross Who cried out, 'My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?'" They looked to see if what Paul taught was validated in the Scriptures.

One thing we need to be careful of is taking the example of the Bereans too far. Some might decide to criticize a pastor or other church teacher, then say, "Well, I'm just being a good Berean. It's my job to question everything they say, even if it makes their lives miserable." To be a Berean is not to question a teacher in a critical way. Rather, it's listening to what they say, accepting it, but wanting to see it confirmed in Scripture for themselves. There's sometimes a place to critique the teachings we hear in church, although it needs to be done with humility and respect.

Growth happens as we approach God's Word daily.

The Bereans were actually wanting to confirm the teachings they heard from Paul. In order to do that properly, we ourselves need to study the Word daily. As soon as I make this third point, you'll write it on your outlines and close your Bibles. But I never told you we were done. I know what you do and it grieves me greatly. Amanda helps me with my grief and I'm in counseling as well. Actually, it wouldn't bother me except I know, deep down inside, that some of you won't open that Bible again until you hear me say next Sunday, "Open your Bibles to the book of Acts..."

Here's what I know as a pastor. I will fall into every sort of sin, I will destroy my family, I will destroy this church's testimony, and I will walk all over the name of Christ when I am not walking in fellowship with God in His Word. We have to be careful. We must study the Word daily. That's why our small groups are built the way they are.

Growth happens as we approach God's Word expectantly.

The Bereans believed that what they were studying was going to change their lives. Do you believe that, brother or sister? Do you believe that what you're studying in the Word will change your life? Do you believe the words of abundance, blessing, peace, joy,

and compassion God has given you will change your life? Do you believe that the book of Acts, written 2,000 years ago, has a way to set you free? The Bereans believed this, and it says that they believed in Jesus as a result.

When we are in relationship with the Word, we will grow into a greater relationship with Jesus.

Deploying disciples to do the work.

When we go about discovering disciples and when we develop them through the Word, we don't want them simply to become sponges that never get squeezed out. We want to send them into the world. We want to deploy them into God's service. Today we heard about how that happens regarding orphan care ministry, something that pleases God.

As you go out this week to share the good news of Jesus Christ, there are three reminders I want to give you.

As we engage in God's work, remember ministry is hard work, not a holiday.

.Paul went to Thessalonica and Berea. If you look at images of those towns, they might be places you would want to visit on your vacation. But we hear nothing of Paul taking any breaks. He continued to do the work.

Some of us have centered our lives on ourselves, seeking to make everything we do some sort of vacation. But ministry is not about us—it's about Christ. We are to be focused on sharing the gospel, in small ways and in big ways, with the world around us. We have work to do. We have been left on earth to preach the good news of Jesus Christ.

As we engage in God's work, remember to count the cost.

Let's talk for a minute about Jason, whom we read about in today's passage in Acts 17. Yes, Jason is a biblical name—you might not have known that! Jason was a behind-the-scenes sort of guy who opened his home to the missionary team. What did that gain him? He got beaten and thrown in jail. He wasn't up front preaching; he was just being a good follower of Christ.

We need to realize that regardless of the role we play—small or large—it could come with a cost. At times, even the most noble things we do will bring an attack from the opposition. Jason stood firm in his convictions as he testified to the magistrates and leaders, and he did not crumble when he was opposed.

This week as you share the love of Jesus Christ with someone, maybe even in a small way, that person may respond with, "Who do you think you are? What right have you to tell me this?" But we have been told that at times there will be a cost to pay, possibly even greater than a verbal rebuke.

As we engage in God's work, remember we will be received by some and rejected by others.

Finally, when we discover, develop, and deploy disciples, some people will receive our message and others will reject it. The response will be divided. Over and over in the text we read that "many believed." Women believed, men believed, Greeks believed, Jews believed—many people believed. But we also know that amidst that, many also rejected the gospel.

The same will be true for us. When we take a step of faith for God in the coming week, there will be some who will believe. We will begin to turn the world upside down. But as that happens, other people will fight us. As the text describes, they will respond with agitation and disruption. They will seek to hurt us physically and emotionally, trying to do everything in their power to stop us.

Why will they do this? Because the world doesn't want to be turned upside down. The world is content in their sin and selfishness. We're bringing a different King to the table. When we preach the gospel, we're saying to the world, "You're not king. I'm not king. The only One Who is King is King Jesus."

This represents a coup to the world. We're telling them to stop worshiping and adoring themselves, but instead to bow their knee to Jesus. Do you think people are going to be offended by this? You'd better believe it. But the power of almighty God takes His spoken Word and melts the hearts of some who hear it. Some will believe.

This week, there are some people who need to hear the gospel. They may not know it, but they are ready to receive it. Even if they've said, "It will never happen to me," they may end up being like my friend at the dining room table. After two hours of hearing Jesus died for them and wants to give them eternal life, they may change their thinking. But it's up to us to engage them. When we do, we will make a difference, and will turn the world upside down.