

THE CHRISTOCENTRIC PRINCIPLE OF HERMENEUTICS
AND LUKE 24:27

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October 4, 2010

Introduction:

Christocentricity has frequently been proffered both as a sure guide to proper interpretation of Scripture and as a guard against faulty interpretation. Butler, in commenting on Luke 24:27, has expressed this principle as follows:

Jesus said one principle should guide your reading of Scripture. You should search the Scriptures to see how each part points to the life, death, resurrection, and mission of Jesus. Scripture is read correctly only when it is read in light of Jesus. Other readings of Scripture are in error because they miss the main point of the writing. The Hebrew Scriptures were not written to provide a history in preparation for Mohammed. They were not written to become a law book that formed the basis for the moral interpretations of the Talmud. They were written to prepare people to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God, Redeemer of Israel, and Savior of the World.¹

Nearly all Christian interpreters would agree in general with this sentiment; however, “christocentricity” must be carefully defined and limited, or it may itself become the cause of faulty interpretation. The excessive practice of christocentric interpretation among the reformers leading to extremes in typological and allegorical interpretation is well known, and in more recent times, christocentricity has even become an earmark of a “neo-orthodox dogmatic interest (as distinct from a legitimate historiographical issue).”² According to Farrar, Luther’s 6 principles of interpretation were:

1. The necessity for grammatical knowledge.
2. The importance of taking into consideration times, circumstances, and conditions.
3. The observance of the context.

¹ Trent C. Butler, *Luke*, Holman New Testament Commentary, vol. 3; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 425.

² Richard A. Muller, “A Note on ‘Christocentrism’ And The Imprudent Use Of Such Terminology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* Volume 68, 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2006), 254.

4. The need of faith and spiritual illumination.
5. Keeping what he called “the proportion of faith.”
6. The reference of all Scripture to Christ.³

It is the all-inclusiveness of Luther’s sixth principle that often led him to the abuse of this principle.⁴ Calvin, likewise, was known for taking the christocentric principle to an extreme.⁵

Other examples of overstatement of the christocentric principle might be found in such well-known and respected commentators as Godet:

Jesus had before him a grand field, from the Protevangelium, the first great Gospel of Genesis, down to Malachi. In studying the Scriptures for himself, he had found himself in them everywhere (John 5:39, 40).⁶

or Matthew Henry:

There are things dispersed throughout *all the scriptures* concerning Christ, which it is of great advantage to have *collected* and *put together*. You cannot go far in any part of scripture but you meet with something that has reference to Christ, some prophecy, some promise, some prayer, some type or other; for he is the true *treasure in the field* of the Old Testament. A golden thread of gospel grace runs through the whole web of the Old Testament. There is an *eye* of that *white* to be discerned in every place.⁷

or Warren Wiersbe: “The key to understanding the Bible is to see Jesus Christ on every page.”⁸

³ Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1886), 332.

⁴ Farrar, 334-36. Farrar notes specifically, “When Luther reads the doctrines of the Trinity, and the Incarnation, and Justification by Faith, and Reformation dogmatics and polemics, into passages written more than a thousand years before the Christian era -- when, in a spirit worthy of R. Aqiba himself, he infers the Divinity of the Messiah and the ‘Communication of Idioms’ from the particle *אֵל* in Gen. v. 22, he is adopting an unreal method which had been rejected a millennium earlier by the clearer insight and more unbiased wisdom of the School of Antioch” (p.334).

⁵ David S. Dockery, Trent C. Butler, Christopher L. Church et al., *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 31-32.

⁶ Cited in *The Pulpit Commentary: St Luke Vol. II*, ed. H. D. M. Spence-Jones (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), 271.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), Lk 24:13–35.

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), Lk 24:13.

Such extremes have led many interpreters to violate the principle of literal interpretation. One of the most obvious areas of violation of literal interpretation due to the christocentric principle is seen in approaches to the Song of Solomon. Understood literally, this beautiful song portrays the joys of a love relationship between man and wife as designed by God.⁹ Yet many interpreters have thought this an unworthy theme for the Scriptures, and because of their commitment to christocentricity have adopted an allegorical interpretation. Such was the view of J. Hudson Taylor:

Read without the key, this book is specially unintelligible, but that key is easily found in the express teachings of the New Testament. The Incarnate Word is the true key to the written Word... In Solomon, the bridegroom king, as well as author of this poem, we have a type of our Lord, the true Prince of peace, in His coming reign.¹⁰

In a similar vein, McPhee argues:

When we see the bride so gently won to a wholehearted allegiance and devotion to her beloved, her life redeemed from the bondage of serving in the enemies' vineyards until at last she is seen in such happy adjustment to her beloved, bringing forth fruit for his pleasure, caring for the weaker sisters, leaning upon him for guidance and comfort, and finally resting and waiting for him in the gardens with his friends where her testimony of him and her worship directed to him gladden his heart, how can we fail to see in this beautiful story a picture of our lives as they should develop under the inconceivable grace of our Beloved?¹¹

Likewise reasons the great Puritan author Burrowes:

In the eyes of many who are Israelites indeed, in whom is no guile, this Song is in as bad repute as was Nazareth of old; and when they say, Can any good thing come out of this book? with the feelings of Philip, we reply, Come and see. Here we have found Him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write; and as that ancient saint saw in Jesus of Nazareth more than the son of Joseph, even the Messiah – so does divine illumination cause us to see in this portrait of the Beloved, a greater than Solomon, even him in whom

⁹ It is a Platonic dualism, not the Bible, that portrays physical love between man and wife in a negative light. God created the entire physical universe, including man and woman, and declared it to be “very good” (Gen 1:27, 31). While Adam and Eve were still in their innocent state, God made them “one flesh” and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28; 2:22-25).

¹⁰ J. Hudson Taylor, *Union and Communion or Thoughts on the Song of Solomon*, (London: China Inland Mission, 1914), 2-3.

¹¹ L. M. McPhee, *The Romance of the Ages*, (Oak Park, IL: Designed Products, Inc., 1950) 3.

dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily ... therefore ... this Song is to be interpreted allegorically....¹²

One of the key Scriptural references used to support the hermeneutical principle of christocentricity is Luke 24:27, “And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets He interpreted¹³ to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”¹⁴ An examination of this verse in its context will show that, while generally supporting the idea of christocentricity in the Scriptures, it does *not* support the extreme view that Christ is to be found in every single verse, let alone every phrase or word.

1. Contextual Setting

Luke 24:27 falls within the pericope of Christ’s revelation of Himself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As such, it forms a part of the four-fold post-resurrection sequence of events as recorded by Luke:

1. Discovery of the body’s absence – first day of the week early in the morning (τῆ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων ὄρθρου βαθέως), 24:1-12
 - a. By the women, 1-11
 - b. By Peter, 12
2. Jesus appears, unrecognizable at first, to the Emmaus disciples – late afternoon of the same day, 24:13-35

¹² George Burrowes, *A Commentary on the Song of Solomon* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1853), 53-54.

¹³ From διαρμηνεύω which may mean “to translate,” “to interpret,” or “to explain” (BDAG s.v. διαρμηνεύω).

¹⁴ Other Scriptural support is found in Lk 24:44; Matt. 5:17-20; John 5:46.

3. Jesus appears recognizable to the disciples in Jerusalem – evening of the same day, 24:36-49
4. Ascension, vv.50-51¹⁵

Luke’s purpose in recording the three resurrection day appearances focuses heavily on the importance of Scripture in producing faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus. There is a noted progression: The first appearance (24:1-12) involves no citation from or teaching from the Scriptures.¹⁶ The response of the disciples to this first appearance is recorded in verse 11, “These words appeared before them as nonsense, and they did not believe them.” The second appearance (24:13-35) involves Jesus’ teaching of the two disciples from the entirety of the Hebrew canon of Scripture (verse 27, “Moses,” “all the Prophets,” “all the Scriptures”¹⁷). The response of these two disciples was twofold: (1) their “heart was burning within [them]” (verse 32), indicating a strong desire to share the information with others (cf. Jer 20:9; Ps 39:3); and (2) they returned joyfully to Jerusalem to proclaim the risen Lord Jesus. The third appearance (24:36-49) was to all the disciples¹⁸ assembled in Jerusalem. Like the second appearance, this one involved Jesus’ teaching of the disciples from the entirety of the Hebrew canon of Scripture (verse 44, “the Law

¹⁵ In the Gospel account, Luke introduces verse 50 as if it followed immediately upon verse 49. It is only when one consults Acts 1:3 that he learns of the intervening period of nearly forty days. Both Matthew and John give some details of this extended post-resurrection ministry in Galilee, but Luke and Mark omit the Galilean phase.

¹⁶ In vv. 6-7 the angels remind them of Jesus’ prediction of His death and resurrection, but this was not yet a part of canonical Scripture and cannot here be construed as instruction from Scripture.

¹⁷ Whether ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς (“in all the Scriptures) refers to the writings (כְּתוּבִים) portion of the Hebrew canon (e.g. Butler, 425) or simply sums up the entirety of the Tanak (Robert H. Stein *Luke*. electronic ed. Logos Library System; The New American Commentary, Vol. 24 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001], 612), clearly all three designations in this verse have the entire Hebrew canon in view here. See the more specific reference to the כְּתוּבִים under the designation Ψάλμοι in v. 44. For further comments see section three of this paper, “Canonical Divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures.”

¹⁸ According to verse 33, “the eleven” were assembled together; however, according to Jn 20:24 Thomas was absent. Apparently the expression “the eleven” was used somewhat loosely to refer to the entire company, even though only ten of them were actually present. Jn 20:26 records that Thomas was present with the other ten some eight days later when Jesus again appeared to the entire group.

of Moses,” “the Prophets,” “the Psalms”¹⁹). It is significant to note that in this third post-resurrection appearance, though the disciples recognized Him before His expounding of the Scriptures, their initial response was, “They still could not believe it” (verse 41), but after Jesus’ teaching from the Scriptures, it is recorded that they waited patiently for “the promise of the Father” (verse 49). Thus one may discern in the three post-resurrection appearances a progression of faith. Jesus appeared on all three of these occasions, but faith only accompanied the exposition of the Scriptures.

2. Geographical Considerations

The location of Emmaus is disputed. Luke appears to give a clear designation of the place in verse 13 where he describes Emmaus as sixty stadia distance from Jerusalem (ἀπέχουσιν σταδίους ἑξήκοντα ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλήμ). Sixty stadia are approximately seven miles. The traditional site of Emmaus, Nicopolis-‘Imwas, is located some twenty-two miles from Jerusalem, near the modern day city of Latrun. This is the site that was affirmed by Eusebius in his *Onomasticon*.²⁰ Likely because of this, some later manuscripts²¹ have Luke 24:13 placing Emmaus at “one hundred-sixty stadia” from Jerusalem. If this is the Emmaus of Luke 24:13, it is difficult to comprehend how the disciples could have returned to Jerusalem after the evening meal, for not only is the distance formidable, but the terrain is steep, rocky, traversing numerous

¹⁹ Psalms, standing at the head of the פְּתוּחִים section is evidently used here as the title for the entire section.

²⁰ Eusebius *Onomasticon*, 90:15.

²¹ Ⲙ K* Θ H Syr^{pal} arm.

ravines and constituting an 1,800 foot rise in elevation.²² However, the United Bible Society's fourth edition is probably correct in favoring the shorter reading of sixty stadia.²³ The apparent discrepancy may be resolved by accepting an alternate site for Emmaus. Josephus speaks of a smaller village of Emmaus located a mere thirty stadia from Jerusalem.²⁴ Thirty stadia are a mere three and a half miles, a site within the modern municipality of Jerusalem (though well outside the old city walls). Though this is just half the distance recorded by Luke, the Evangelist may have had in mind the total round trip distance when he referred to sixty stadia.²⁵ Josephus' alternate site seems to be a much more satisfactory solution to the location of Emmaus than Eusebius' Emmaus-Imwas.

Granting the location of Emmaus at this village a mere three and a half miles from Jerusalem, one may easily grasp how these two disciples could have rushed back after supper to the others to report the wonderful news. One also has a clearer understanding of how much time Jesus likely spent with the two disciples as He interpreted for them "the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (verse 27). The entire three and a half miles can be easily walked in about an hour, perhaps a bit longer at a leisurely pace. Luke does not disclose how far along the path the disciples were before Jesus joined them, but presumably they had made some progress. Luke also reveals that there was some dialog between the disciples and Jesus after He joined them, but before He began His exposition of the Scriptures. It is likely, therefore, that the entire exposition took only thirty to forty-five minutes – no doubt a most fascinating class

²² Emmaus-Imwas is at approximately 730 feet elevation, while Jerusalem is at about 2,500 feet elevation. An elevation rise of 1,800 feet in 22 miles would be a considerable accomplishment for an all day hike. For these 2 disciples to accomplish the feat after their evening meal involves quite a stretch of the imagination.

²³ Based on the reading in A B D p⁷⁵.

²⁴ Josephus, *Wars* 7:217.

²⁵ Anson F. Raney and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 368.

session in Bible Survey! This observation is instructive when attempting to understand the extent to which christocentricity may be pressed. If Jesus' exposition covered "all the Scriptures," it must necessarily have been in summary fashion. There were references to be found to His death and resurrection in each of the three major divisions of the Hebrew canon (Torah, Prophets and Writings), but this is not to say that direct reference must be found to Christ in every verse of the Bible. At most it can be said that christocentricity is a general principle relating to the broad scope of Scripture.

3. Canonical Divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures

Luke 24:27 describes a breakdown of the Hebrew canon into parts, but scholars are divided over whether Luke designated two parts (Moses and the Prophets) or three parts (Moses, the Prophets, and the Scriptures). Traditionally, it was held that the three part division of the Hebrew canon into "Law," "Prophets" and "Writings" (*Torah, N^evi'im, K^etuvim*) was officially adopted at the Council of Jamnia. Today, there is scholarly debate as to whether there ever *was* a late first century Council of Jamnia at which the final shape of the Hebrew canon, and specifically admission to the canon of the *K^etuvim*, was authorized.²⁶

Regardless of any councils, the New Testament (Luke's Gospel in particular) appears to affirm the existence of the three-fold division. The three-fold division may be in view in Luke 24:27, "beginning from Moses and from all the prophets ... in all the Scriptures" (ἀρχάμενος ἀπὸ Μωϋσέως καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν προφητῶν ... ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς), but the point is debated. Marshall sums up the issue as follows:

²⁶ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Revised and Expanded (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 237-40.

The clause may be construed in two ways: 1. It may mean that the speaker started from the law and the prophets in finding things written about himself. 2. More probably it means that he searched in *all* the Scriptures, but starting from (i.e. principally from) the law and the prophets. If we adopt this latter view, then ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς will refer to the books of the OT generally (24:32, 45; Acts 17:2, 11; 18:24, 28; A. Oepke, TDNT I, 752). The view that the phrase refers purely to the third part of the OT canon, the ‘writings’ (Grundmann, 446; cf. 24:44) is difficult syntactically.²⁷

If the three-fold division is not explicit in Luke 24:27, it appears to be so in Luke 24:44, “Now He said to them, ‘These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled’” (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ Μωϋσέως καὶ τοῖς προφήταις καὶ ψαλμοῖς). Here “Law,” “Prophets,” and “Psalms” are syntactically equivalent, all three comprising the compound object of the same preposition. That ψαλμοῖς should designate the third division of the canon is not surprising, since it was common practice to name an extended portion of Scripture after the initial word in that section. “Psalms,” being the first book in the Writings section would naturally serve as the title for the entire section.²⁸ That the remainder of the books of the third section were also acknowledged in the New Testament era seems to be implied by Christ’s words recorded in Luke 11:48–51 (and the parallel in Mt 23:34):

So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build their tombs. For this reason also the wisdom of God said, “I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.”

²⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New international Greek Testament Commentary* (Exeter, Eng.: Paternoster Press, 1978), 897.

²⁸ John Bond, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1890), 157; Stein, 620; Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Lk 24:44.

The “blood of Abel” is clearly a reference to Genesis 4:8, but what about the “blood of Zechariah”? This is not a reference to the post-exilic prophet Zechariah who authored the book in the Minor Prophets; rather, this is the Zechariah whose death at the hands of king Joash was recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-21. The significance of this reference is that 2 Chronicles is the last book of the Writings section of the Hebrew canon. Thus, in referring to both Cain and Zechariah in the same sentence, it is as if Jesus was referring to the entirety of the Hebrew canon, from the first book of the first section to the last book of the last section. Thus we see all three sections of the Hebrew canon referred to implicitly once again in the Gospel of Luke.

Luke’s fairly explicit reference to the three sections of the Hebrew canon in 24:44, and his implicit reference to the entire extent of the Hebrew canon in 11:51 make it a reasonable inference that the language of 24:27 includes all three sections of the Hebrew canon – the Law, Prophets and Writings. If, as has been shown in the previous section, Jesus’ exposition of the Scriptures occurred over a period of time under an hour, the christocentric principle of interpretation cannot be pressed to such an extent as to require that Christ be the focal point of every verse of the Bible. Rather, it shows that in numerous places throughout all three sections of the Hebrew canon, references may be found to the sufferings and resurrection of the Messiah.

4. Progression of the Passage

The way Luke refers to the various emotional responses of the disciples in the post-resurrection appearances is quite interesting and appears to focus attention on the Emmaus Road experience. As noted in the first section of this paper (“Contextual Setting”), there are three chronological settings for the resurrection day appearances: early morning, late afternoon, and evening. These three chronological settings set the stage for appearances to (1) the women, (2)

Peter (who witnesses the empty tomb, but does not actually see Christ), (3) the Emmaus disciples, and (4) the entire company of the disciples. In response to each of these four resurrection day experiences, Luke records a wide variety of emotional responses. Consider the following outline:

1. Discovery of the body's absence – first day of the week early morning (τῇ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων ὄρθρου βαθέως), 24:1-12
 - a. By the women, 1-11
 - i. Response:
 1. v. 4 perplexed at the empty tomb (ἀπορέω), to be in doubt, uncertain, at a loss
 2. v. 5 terrified by the 2 angels (ἔμφοβος), afraid, startled
 - b. By Peter, 12
 - i. Response:
 1. marveling at the empty tomb (θαυμάζω), to wonder at, be astonished, be amazed (see v. 41 below)
 2. solitude (ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς ἑαυτὸν). However, note v.24; apparently, Peter did go on to share with the others what he had seen. Verse 12 occurred early in the morning. Between verses 12 and 13 Peter must have rejoined the disciples for further discussions.
2. Jesus appears, unrecognizable at first, to the Emmaus disciples – late afternoon, 24:13-35
 - a. Response:
 - i. v. 17 sadness at being asked what they were discussing (σκυθρωπός), gloomy, sullen, dark

- ii. v. 22 amazed (ἐξίστημι), a description of their earlier response to the women's testimony. ἐξίστημι, to be confused, amazed, astounded, astonished.
 - iii. v.32 hearts burned when Jesus taught them from the Scriptures (καρδία ἡμῶν καιομένη ἦν) (cf. Jer 20:9; Ps 39:3 for the expression)
3. Jesus appears recognizable to the disciples in Jerusalem – evening, 24:36-49
- a. Response:
 - i. v.37 startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost (πτοέω) to terrify, frighten; (ἔμφοβος) afraid, startled, terrified
 - ii. v. 38 troubled and doubts in their hearts (ταράσσω) to disturb, unsettle, throw into confusion; (διαλογισμός ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ) reasoning, opinion, dispute, doubt
 - iii. v. 41 joy and amazement at realizing that Jesus was really present with them (χαρά) joy, gladness; (θαυμάζω) wonder at, be astonished, be amazed (see v. 12 above)
4. Ascension, vv.50-51 (no temporal deixis)
- a. Response: v. 52 great joy (μετὰ χαρᾶς μεγάλης)

The various expressions used to describe these emotional responses can be summarized in the following list:

1. v. 4 (ἀπορέω), be in doubt, uncertain, at a loss
2. v. 5 (ἔμφοβος), afraid, startled
3. v. 12 (θαυμάζω), to wonder at, be astonished, be amazed
4. v. 12 (ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς ἑαυτὸν) solitude

5. v. 17 (σκυθρωπός), sad, gloomy, sullen, dark
6. v. 22 (ἐξίστημι), to be confused, amazed, astounded, astonished.
7. v. 32 (καρδία ἡμῶν καιομένη ἦν) hearts burned
8. v. 37 (πτοέω) to terrify, frighten
9. v. 37 (ἔμφοβος) afraid, startled, terrified
10. v. 38 (ταράσσω) trouble, disturb, unsettle, throw into confusion
11. v. 38 (διαλογισμός ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ) reasoning, opinion, dispute, doubt
12. v. 41 (χαρά) joy, gladness;
13. v. 41 (θαυμάζω) wonder at, be astonished, be amazed
14. v. 52 (μετὰ χαρᾶς μεγάλης) great joy

This variety of emotional responses proceeds from fear at one extreme, to joy at the other extreme. Between these two extremes, we find such things as wonder and amazement. But only in response to the teaching of Jesus, do we find the remarkable expression of the “burning heart.” Understood in the light of Jeremiah 20:9 and Psalm 39:3, this speaks of the intense desire to share what is being learned with others. This response is unique in this chapter and is just about in the center of the account, thus drawing attention to its significance. It is in response to the exposition of the Word of God that such an intense burning was kindled in the disciples’ hearts. And this burning occurred even before Jesus had revealed Himself personally! It was indeed a christocentric teaching of the Word of God that produced a joyful, confident and evangelistic zeal.

Conclusion

Jesus' exposition of Scripture to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus provides us with a crucial reference for the christocentric principle of hermeneutics. By examining the context of this passage, as well as the specific language used to describe both the canonical divisions of Scripture and the emotional responses of the disciples on the resurrection day, it has been shown that Christ appealed broadly to all divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures to prove that they prophesied of His death and resurrection, and to inspire the disciples to faithful, joyful, evangelistic service. Excessive appeal to the christocentric principle has gone far beyond the practice of Jesus and has provided a faulty basis for an allegorical interpretation of many portions of Scripture. May we be careful to follow the balanced approach to exegesis modeled by our Lord on the Emmaus Road, adhering to a literal hermeneutic, and proclaiming the Word in such a way as to set the hearts of Jesus' disciples ablaze with a burning desire to spread the good news of our risen and returning Lord!

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