

Why People Oppose Christians

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[0:00] Well, good morning again. Lovely to be able to talk about God's Word together, which we're going to do now. We're continuing our series that we're in the middle of, which is the birth of the church, where we're looking primarily at the book of Acts.

We're looking in the New Testament at the first Christians, the first church, and then hopefully as we do that Sunday by Sunday and see the different aspects of what the early church looked like, we're going to be measuring ourselves as Christians to that early church.

It's a very important thing to do, to get back into touch with our roots 2,000 years later. Well, a few years ago I was bored at home one day, and so I decided for a laugh to join a Flat Earth Facebook group.

And I thought it would be funny, and it is, but it actually was quite scary how many people are out there who genuinely believe the Earth is flat, not a globe, but a flat disk floating in space.

And the whole globe story of the Earth is a conspiracy that we've been fed by the international space agencies to keep us in the dark. It's a serious following. There's even a documentary on Netflix about the flat Earthers.

[1:12] Now the thing is, it's a ridiculous belief, right? I mean, we know the Earth is right. I don't want to get into a debate about it because it's obvious we have enough proof to know that we live on a globe.

But they're serious about it, and nobody really minds. I mean, people laugh at them, the Flat Earthers, but people let them believe what they want. They have their conferences, they have their websites, they have their Facebook pages, and nobody really minds.

They're not censored, they're not persecuted, because they have no basis in fact. Nobody's threatened by them, and so people just ignore them and let them get on with their fantasy of Flat Earth.

Contrast that with how many Christians are being persecuted for what they believe. Today, even, 2,000 years after the establishment of the church, an estimated today, alive, living today, 240 million Christians face some form of active persecution.

Despite not breaking the law, not doing anything to deserve it, not hurting anyone, they are persecuted, they are shut down by the authorities and by other people.

[2:24] And the question we've got to ask is, why? Why can't people just leave them alone like the Flat Earthers? Have you ever wondered that?

What's the difference between Flat Earthers, who people don't believe and leave alone, and Christians, who people don't believe and violently persecute? What's the difference? Well, the difference is there's something to the Christian message that people don't want to hear, but they can't ignore.

That's why there's so much violent persecution. That's why Christianity is officially the most persecuted religion in the world. And this morning, I want us to see what that is.

What is it about the Christian gospel that makes people so opposed to it? What is it about the Christian gospel that people can't ignore, even though they don't want to hear it?

And why is it that Christians throughout history who have harmed no one are still being imprisoned and fined and even executed? And while we discover that, which we do in this passage, if we're listening carefully, we'll also see what kind of reactions we can expect as we share the message of Jesus here in Plumstead and Cape Town in South Africa.

[3:35] And it's something we discover as we read through the missionary journeys Paul went on. So in this section of Acts, starting from chapter

13 all the way to chapter 21, we read about the exploits of Paul and Barnabas and Silas and the other apostles and their three famous missionary journeys in the Mediterranean region.

Fantastic stories to read through. We don't have time, obviously, to read all of those chapters now. But Acts 17 is in the middle of their second missionary journey.

So it's smack bang in the middle of their adventures. And that's where we're going to join Paul and his friends. We're going to meet up with them in a place called Thessalonica. Thessalonica actually still exists today, called Thessaloniki in northern Greece.

It was called Macedonia back then. It was a very important trading city. And so Paul headed there to share the gospel. And that's where we find ourselves at the beginning of chapter 17.

So turn with me. Let's see what happened. Chapter 17, we see initially when he went to the synagogue and he started teaching about Jesus, he had some success. Look at verse 4.

[4:46] Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, including a large number of God-faring Greeks as well as a number of leading women. Okay, so there was success. Good.

We see people coming to faith. But it didn't take long before Paul faced some trouble as well. Look at the next verse. But the Jews became jealous and they brought together some wicked men from the marketplace, forming a mob, and started a riot in the city, attacking Jason's house.

They searched for them to bring them out to the public assembly. So it didn't take long before Paul and his friends were in trouble. Now why? What did they do wrong? You read the story? They didn't litter.

They didn't offend anyone. They didn't attack anyone. They weren't rude. They were very respectful. They obeyed the laws. Why on earth this reaction?

They're accused of, if you look down at verse 6, turning the world upside down. It depends on what translation you have. But look at what they say. They dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials.

[5:52] And these men who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Wow, that's quite an accusation. I mean, they were a fairly pleasant group of guys. But they were accused of causing trouble and turning the world upside down.

And they were hauled before the magistrates all because, not because of their personality or because they were particularly abrasive, but because of their message. That's the thing that got them into trouble. What they were saying, their message.

It was a message that just incensed people. It got people very angry. And so, what we're going to look at as we read on, and we continue the story into Berea and Athens, which is basically, if you picture modern Greece, Thessalonica is at the top.

Berea is a little bit south of that, and Athens is kind of at the bottom. Okay, so we're following that leg of a journey this morning. And as we do, I just want us to see two reactions, two things that happen whenever the gospel is proclaimed.

And not just in this little leg of the journey, but it happens throughout all three missionary journeys. The same pattern repeats itself. We see a number of things whenever the message is proclaimed.

[7:03] And the first thing we see whenever the message of Jesus is proclaimed is that it upsets the status quo. It rocks the boat. And not just in these three missionary journeys, but in every age.

History shows us when the gospel is proclaimed, it upsets the status quo. But only if you preach it properly. You see, if you go and tell people, God loves you, and you're the apple of his eye, and he has a wonderful plan for your life.

Nobody's going to have a problem with that, right? It's a very nice thing to hear. But that wasn't Paul's message. This is what got him into trouble. Have a look at his message. Chapter 17, verse 3. At the end of it. This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah. No, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. But this is the message that got him into trouble.

And the Jews who he was proclaiming that message, you knew exactly what he meant by that. You see what they accuse him of later on in front of the magistrates. Go down to verse 6. The end of verse 6.

[8:12] These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too. And Jason has welcomed them. Look what they say now. They are all acting contrary to Caesar's decree, saying that there is another king.

Jesus. You see, the Jews knew what Paul meant when he said, this Jesus is the Messiah. They understood that he was proclaiming a new authority. And that's what got him into trouble.

But that is the gospel message. We've been seeing over the last few weeks, haven't we? The heart of the gospel message for the early apostles that started the church and changed the world is different often to the gospel message we hear today.

Jesus, you know, loves you and God has a wonderful plan for your life. No, the message that was proclaimed then is Jesus is the king who is coming to judge and all people are accountable to him. It's a very controversial message. But it was the same gospel that Peter preached in Acts 2. You remember Pentecost, that famous sermon in Pentecost, his climax of his sermon, you'll remember. God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.

[9:16] It's the same gospel. And that's what got the apostles into trouble. You would think, well, you know, Paul and Peter, come on, guys, you could just couch it a little bit differently.

You could just tell people that Jesus loves them and they should join the church and their life's going to improve. Paul and Peter would have laughed in your face and said, but that's not the gospel. This is the gospel. People need to know Jesus is their Lord.

They need to submit to him. They were adamant, no matter what trouble they got into, to make sure that people heard that message. And interestingly, so that was their message. Jesus is the Messiah.

The Jews knew what that was. The son of God, the king of Israel who's going to come down and rule over all people, as the Old Testament says. Now, non-Jews, Greeks, Gentiles, they didn't know the Old Testament.

So what did Paul tell them? Did he go to them and say, God has a wonderful plan for your life? What was the message he told them? Well, we see the answer to that in this chapter in Acts 17 when he's in Athens with the Greeks who aren't Jews.

[10:17] But what we see is it's exactly the same message as he's been telling the Jews. Have a look at chapter 17, verse 31. 17, verse 31, by the way.

Acts 17, verse 31. Memorize it. It's a fantastic verse if you want to share the gospel with people to memorize. God has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed.

He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. He didn't mention Messiah or Christ, anointed one, but the same message, the same essence.

That God is going to judge the world through this man, Jesus, and we know it to be true. It's not just a theory because Jesus rose from the dead in our world, in history. Jesus is the Lord of all people whether they realize it or not.

Jesus is the Lord of your work, colleague, whether or not they're a Christian. Jesus is the Lord of the person who sits next to you on the train. Well, sits 1.5 meters away from you on the train now.

[11:18] But you know what I mean? Everybody around us is actually under the authority of Jesus Christ. That is the gospel message. And that's what they need to hear.

And if that is understood, it will always upset people who don't submit to Jesus. It will always upset the status quo. And we see that time and time again through these missionary journeys and through history.

That message, when it's preached properly, will always upset the status quo. And you see, as you read through, and I would encourage you to read through chapters 13 to 21, these three missionary journeys, every single time, no matter what culture Paul ends up in, no matter what people he ends up preaching to, Luke makes a point, who writes Acts, makes a point of showing how his message clashed with the different cultures that he visited.

In different ways, but every time in some way it clashed with the culture. Almost every time, Paul is accused of disturbing the city or turning the world upside down or something like that.

And the reason is, because he's going there, into these places. And he's announcing, there's a new sheriff in town, people. And they don't want to hear it. It's like those westerns.

[12:31] I don't know if you enjoy western movies. But those classic old westerns, typically the storyline is that there's this old west town, and there's a gang of hooligans, ruffians, criminals, criminal element, and they rule over the town.

And the sheriff is, they've got the sheriff in their pocket, they're paying him off or intimidating him, and he's just letting them get away with everything. And all the townspeople are all just ducking low for cover and not wanting to get involved.

You know, when the gang comes in their black clothes and their black hats and their black horses, everybody closes the shutters and scatters. You know those movies? And then they rule over the town.

Everybody's very intimidated. But then, then, act two of the movie, there's a new sheriff in town.

And he's a righteous sheriff. And he's wearing a white hat and a white suit.

And that causes the trouble because he's come to lay down the law. And he's come to clean up the town. And that's what gets the movie going. But that's what's happening here in Acts.

[13:32] You see, Paul is going into each of these towns and saying, there's a new sheriff in town. And you know what? Jesus did start cleaning up those towns. In very obvious ways, when Paul and his friends were proclaiming this message.

Miraculous ways. In Philippi, for example, we read about a slave girl who had a demon inside her, and these men were profiting off her, Paul comes along, and Jesus, through him, drives out the demon.

And these men who used to profit from him are very upset, obviously. Jesus starts cleaning up these towns. In Ephesus, people start to believe in the Messiah, and the silversmiths who make the idols want to take Paul to court because he's taking all their business away.

Jesus starts cleaning up towns, and people hate it. And that is the first reason the gospel upsets the status quo, because it announces there's a new sheriff in town. That's the message of the gospel.

There's a new authority. But there's another reason why it upsets the status quo, and we see it in these missionary journeys. Not just because it announces a new authority, but secondly because it challenges people's pre-existing beliefs.

[14:43] It didn't fit into their framework. Look. So, in Lystra and Derby, a few chapters before, I think it's in chapter 14.

It would be a funny story if it wasn't true. But what happens is that these people who live in Lystra and Derby, which is kind of modern-day Turkey region, they believed in the ancient Greek pantheon of gods.

And Paul and Barnabas come. They proclaim the gospel. They start to do miracles to show how Jesus is cleaning up town. And these superstitious Derbians and Lystraans think that Paul and Barnabas are the Greek gods, Zaias and Hermes.

And they start to worship them and sacrifice to them. And obviously Paul and Barnabas are shocked by this, and they tear their cloaks, and they say to these people, No, no, you're getting it wrong. We're proclaiming something different. We're not Greek gods.

We're proclaiming the true God and the true ruler of this world. And then they go, Huh? What? They didn't understand. And then some Jews come along and convince the same crowd who were, a minute ago, worshipping Paul and Barnabas to stone them to death.

[15:52] And they did start, and they almost killed them. But, you see, the thing is, because it didn't fit into their pre-existing belief system, they weren't willing to change their beliefs.

If what Paul and Barnabas were saying didn't fit into what they already believed, they were going to kill them. They didn't want to hear. And we see that time and time again in different contexts.

So here amongst the superstitious Gentiles. But then we visit the, on the other side of the spectrum, we've got these very highfalutin, academic, clever philosopher types. In Athens, we see the same thing.

They couldn't handle what Paul was saying because it didn't fit into what they already decided to believe. Paul came along, and we saw in Athens, from kind of verse 22 onwards, and he said to

them, in summary, you can't believe what you want anymore.

You can't choose what to believe based on what suits you anymore because Jesus has been declared, and he's risen from the dead. And so this is the truth. God has revealed what is actually true in this world, and so no longer can you shop around religion like it's a flavor of yogurt at spa.

[17:07] You don't get to choose anymore. Based on your preference, the truth has been proclaimed. And God has made it clear by raising Jesus from the dead.

That's what he told them. And of course, they didn't want to hear it. Most of them didn't. And so you see, wherever they went, the gospel of Jesus as Lord challenged both the pre-existing authority, people's understanding of what is right and wrong, and the norms of the culture.

It rubbed up against the cultural norms and what was culturally acceptable. And it challenged the existing belief systems. People weren't willing to fit what, well, people tried to fit what Paul and Peter and Barnabas were saying into their existing belief systems, but they didn't want to change what they already had decided to believe.

And we see the same happening today, don't we? Every generation. We see the same two reasons, the same two things the gospel does. It announces a new authority.

It announces that Jesus now gets to determine what is right and wrong for all cultures, because all cultures are under his authority. And so it's not now your culture that gets to decide what is right and wrong, and whatever is popular in the culture, but it's Jesus, because he's the ruler of every culture.

[18:27] And so that's why we see Christianity, for example, clashing today with the sexual liberation movement that has been going on for a number of decades.

People hate what Christians say. Christians are being accused of hate speech. Christians are being told they're intolerant. Christians are being shut up. You know, you ban from internet forums.

If you say, if you say simply, well, actually Jesus gets to decide what we do with our bodies, not us. No, suddenly you're a bigot if you proclaim that Jesus is authority.

If you challenge the cultural authority with the authority of Jesus, you will be in trouble today. And we see how the gospel rubs up against existing belief systems.

People want to believe what suits them. People choose what to believe based on what matches with what they already prefer and their preferences in their lifestyle.

[19:25] So whatever belief system best suits their lifestyle, that's what they'll adopt. The gospel comes along. The gospel does not suit our lifestyle. To submit to a Lord, to be told we're sinners and we need salvation and there's no way to God but through Jesus Christ.

That is not something people want to hear. And so, do you see how today, it's doing exactly the same thing as it did in Acts? It's challenging the authority by saying, Jesus is in charge and new sheriffs in town and you have to listen to him and it's challenging the existing belief systems and it will continue to do so until Jesus comes back.

And so, it shouldn't be a surprise when people attack the gospel because the gospel attacks them. The gospel attacks their lifestyle and their beliefs. We don't.

We don't attack them. Christians, we must love our neighbors. We must be at peace as much as we can. We must be gentle and respectful but realize they will still hate you because of what your message is.

Jesus is Lord. And if they understand that and you communicate that properly, they will not like it. And people will attack the gospel and because you're the closest thing to the gospel, they will attack you.

[20:42] Turn with me to 2 Timothy 3.12. Let's see what he says about this. In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

It's not a very comfortable verse, is it? What does it mean to live a godly life in Christ Jesus? Because Paul is saying to Timothy, everyone who lives a godly life will be persecuted in some way or another.

Well, what does that mean? What does it mean to live a godly life? And people won't persecute you just for being nice, right? If you're nice to them and you're polite to them and you're never rude, rude, people aren't going to persecute you if you're just a nice person.

But that's not all living a godly life in Christ Jesus means then. It's more than just being nice. Living a godly life means living and speaking in a way that declares that Jesus is Lord.

That's what Paul means here when he says living a godly life. That the people of Jesus Christ live as if that's a reality every single day and they speak as if that's a reality every single day that He is Lord.

[21:51] And that, when you do that, no matter how nice you are, it's going to upset people. It's going to upset people if you live and speak in a way that declares that Jesus is Lord.

And that's what Paul is saying here. That's what it means to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. So that's the first thing. Sorry, I know it's bad news but hopefully we can end on a positive note later. But we need to know that. We need to expect that. Because the gospel, the message itself, if we declare it properly, will upset the status quo. But then there's another thing that happens as we go through these missionary journeys.

And that is when the gospel is proclaimed, people either attack it or they let it in. So we see that not only does it upset the status quo and it upsets the norm in every place they go.

But the reactions that the gospel gets are typically one or the other. People will either attack it or they will let it in. And that's where the positive is. But before we look at how people let it in, let's look at how they attack it.

[22:53] So, if you read again through these missionary journeys, you'll see a lot of different ways people attack the gospel. So here in Thessalonica, in Acts 17, they attacked it using a legal route.

They tried to legislate against it. Verse 6, when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials. So they're not dragging them to some dark back alley and beating them up.

They're taking them through the legal processes. And we see that today, don't we? Preaching the authority of Jesus and His rule over sexuality and other parts of life is legislated against more and more.

This very month in South Africa, the president signed the Civil Union Amendment Bill into law. I don't know if you know what that is, but basically, it almost went unnoticed.

But it says that state marriage officers cannot refuse to marry same-sex couples anymore based on conscience or religious belief.

[23:58] And that is one of the ways that we see the message that Jesus actually gets to call the shots and say what marriage is and what it isn't is being legislated against in our own country.

And it has been legislated against in other countries for decades already. And so we see the same way people attack it. But that's not the only way people attack the gospel. In the missionary journeys, we see that they sometimes just use good old-fashioned violence and they try to stone Paul and beat him to death.

But again, we see that today. Maybe not in South Africa yet, but in many, for example, extremist Muslim countries, we see horrendous violence.

And in Africa, many countries in Africa and in the Middle East and in Asia, we see horrendous violence against Christians. Nothing's changed in 2,000 years in terms of people's reactions to the gospel when it's proclaimed properly.

And then here in Athens, we see a third way people attack it. It's typically in academic circles through mockery. Look at verse 32. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him.

[25:10] Ridicule is another way people attack the gospel. And we see that today. Many Christian schoolchildren face that form of attack of the gospel.

Many Christian students in tertiary institutions face that form of, from their lecturers, in public I've heard stories of students being lambasted for their Christian beliefs by their lecturers in a lecture in front of all the other students.

It happens exactly the same. The same ways that people attack the gospel back then in Acts are the ways they attack the gospel now. Okay, so, question is, if this is true, if the gospel message is always going to upset people and people are always going to attack it one way or the other, well

then why bother?

Why bother? Why not just keep quiet and just come to church and just sing to Jesus amongst ourselves? Why bother going out there and proclaiming the name of Jesus to the world that is so hostile against it?

Well, because that's not the only reaction we see in Acts. For other people, the gospel will go in for those who listen. And this is where we have, in the middle of all of this hostility with the Thessalonians and the Athenians, we have this very encouraging little account of the Berean.

[26:29] Look with me in Acts 17 from verse 10. So this is on his way down to Athens. He makes a stop at this place called Berea. Look what happens there. As soon as it was night, the brothers and sisters sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.

Upon arrival, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. The people here were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica since they received the word with eagerness and examined the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Consequently, many of them believed. And so, along with, in every place, people attacking the gospel, we also see these stories of people listening to it and it making a difference.

Even in Athens, where Paul was ridiculed, look what else happened. Verse 19. They took him and brought him to the Areopagus and said, may we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? Some people were interested. Some people are going, okay, well this doesn't fit with what I believe, but I'm interested to hear what he's talking about.

[27:40] And they looked into it and they investigated it and these Bereans are a prime example of that. Every place Paul went, there were some who listened. And it's the same as when we do evangelism, where we share the gospel of Jesus.

Most people will not listen. I can tell you that now. I've done a fair amount of evangelism since being a Christian and the majority of people won't listen.

But a few will. And that's who we do it for. Those people who God causes to listen, to investigate further and to discover the truth.

And they listen not because it doesn't challenge their existing beliefs. They listen because they let it challenge their existing beliefs. And those people who God has prepared, they're out there now, they're waiting for us to tell them the gospel.

They will listen. They will let it in and they will let it challenge what they believe. And that is actually what God wants of all people. He wants us to let what we hear and what we read in the Bible challenge what we already believe.

[28:43] It's a responsibility of us. Not to read the Bible in such a way that it supports what we already want to believe, but to read it in such a way that every time we open it we're waiting for it to challenge us and change us.

That's what God wants and that's what it means to really listen. Not just to hear the word, but to listen to it. In Acts, not Acts, Isaiah 51 that Michiel read for us earlier, listen to what God says over and over again.

Pay attention to me my people and listen to me my nation for instruction will come from me and my justice for a light to the nations. Pay attention.

Listen. That's what God wants. God demands that people listen, that they actually let His words go in and challenge the status quo in our own lives. Do you let that happen? Do you let the Bible challenge the status quo in your own life?

It's an important question because it's not comfortable when it does. Jesus spoke about the difference between those who hear and those who listen.

[29:45] Remember in His parables? Many will hear but there's not a lot who will listen, really listen. and that's because listening, listening, taking in, taking on board, challenges.

Almost always the Bible will challenge some part of our life in some way. And so you'll only listen to this if you're willing to let it change how you live and how you think.

So are you? Are you? Or do you only listen to the Bible insofar as it supports how you already think and live? Like the drunk man who only uses the lamppost to support him rather than to shed light on

his situation.

How do you use the Bible? For support? To support what you already believe and you cherry pick those parts that support it and you read them in such a way that they agree with what you already believe?

Or do you use the Bible to shed light on new things and challenge the way you think? Are you more like the Thessalonians or the Bereans? I don't like what I'm hearing therefore I'm going to oppose it. [30:52] Or I don't like what I'm hearing therefore I'm going to look into it more. I'm going to try to listen. Which do we do? I mean look at social media come on.

Whoever when they hear something they don't agree with goes hmm maybe they've got a point. No we're programmed to just oppose anything that doesn't fit with what we have already decided to believe.

We can't as Christians we've got to be like the Bereans people. And it does happen in the church as well. I'm not just talking about non-Christians accepting the truth from the Bible.

I'm talking about Christians accepting new truths from the Bible. Now I've had a lot of people in this church who come for a while and then they leave and I phone them up and I say hey you know you're not coming to church anymore and then you know what they say?

Well yeah we're not very comfortable with what you're teaching. It doesn't line up to what we what we've you know what we've believed in the past. It doesn't line up to what we believe. And I gently say well why don't you change what you believe?

[31:56] If that's what the Bible says why don't you look into it? But they don't. It's too uncomfortable. When you've got a framework of belief in your head and you think you know what the Bible says and how it works.

Too often people are trying to find churches that teach what already lines up with what's in their head rather than churches that open the word investigate it like the Bereans and let it change us. Which one are you? The true gospel is a message that will challenge all of us. If it's not challenging you in your life you're not listening properly.

And so make sure you're willing to let this challenge the status quo in your life Sunday by Sunday. But also as you do and as you live more in line with the gospel of Jesus as Lord expect more hostility from the world.

As Paul kept on preaching we follow him from Athens into his third missionary journey he ended up in prison. Most likely he died in Rome as a prisoner.

[33:03] But what we also discover is that that's something that God allowed and it turned out for the good. It turned out for our good. Because here's the thing. During Paul's time in prison he ended up writing some of his most important letters in our New Testament which allowed millions more people for thousands more years to keep listening and to keep being challenged and changed by the gospel of Jesus the Lord.

And those four letters that he wrote in prison are the letters that we'll be looking at over the next four weeks. So let's be prepared not just to hear what they say but to really listen to them and let them challenge us and let them change us.

Will you come back and be willing to do that with me over the next four weeks? Well let's pray. Lord we thank you for the truth that the gospel will always upset the status quo.

We thank you for the reminder even though it's uncomfortable to take on board but Lord we pray that you would help us to be like Paul and never to keep quiet because of people's negative reactions.

Help us to not only believe that Jesus is Lord of this earth and is coming back to judge but to live it out. To live godly lives in Christ Jesus despite whatever reactions we might get.

[34:27] Lord help us never to be ashamed to proclaim the true gospel and help us always as we come to church to be willing to let the Bible and these truths challenge us and change us.

Help us to be like the Bereans where we examine these things deeply and we take them on board. We pray this all in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.