

Text: Ac 21.20-26

Proposition: Christians shouldn't object to cultural elements of any social group they are among, if those elements don't directly contradict divine commands.

This morning we will jump ahead in our passage to the most important part of our next section. I plan to go back and pick up the verses I am skipping over in our afternoon service.

Our narrative involves James (the brother of Jesus) and other elders in the Jerusalem church persuading Paul to take part in a Jewish ritual during his visit to Jerusalem.

The whole account raises lots of questions and even some criticism of Paul and the others for this incident. (I don't agree with the criticism.)

1. Why participate in a Jewish ceremony at all now that we are in the New Testament era?
2. What do Jewish ceremonies mean in the Christian church?
3. How can there be a division between the practices of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, yet still maintain a unity within the Christian church?
4. Was Paul wrong or compromised to go along with this suggestion?

Questions like that rise from the passage, but there are other questions for us when we come to application.

1. How does this passage relate to our world, to our situation?
2. To borrow from 2 Tim 3.16-17, what doctrine, rebuke, reproof, instruction in righteousness can we gain from this passage?

Our passage describes a cultural situation that is far removed from ours and is impossible to duplicate today (there is no temple anymore, and we are not Jews). To apply the passage to our lives, we need to think through what Paul is doing in the passage and understand the underlying principles that guided his decisions. Then we can take those principles and apply them to contemporary situations.

Read Ac 20.15-26, text 20-26

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I. The Jewish Christian offense (20-21)

A. The many Jewish converts

1. Acts alone described thousands of converts in the early days

a. Pentecost (2.41)

Ac 2.41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

b. After the healing of the lame man at the temple

Ac 4.4 But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

c. Just before the stoning of Stephen and Saul's persecution

Ac 6.7 ¶ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Many of these were yet in Jerusalem

2. We are now about 27 years in (if crucifixion in AD 30)

a. I don't know of any estimates of entire church at this point in the story

b. I suspect that the numbers of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians worldwide are at least equal, if not more among the Jews

B. Their zeal for their old Law

1. "Zeal for the Law" an old term for Jewish loyalty

a. Goes back to 1 Maccabees describing faithful Jews before NT

b. Almost a patriotic slogan

2. We saw this along the way through Acts as well

a. The concern over Peter's fellowship with Cornelius

- b. The cultural conflict in Antioch when Peter separated from Gentiles to eat with the Jews (Gal 2)
- c. The trouble with Judaizers in Antioch that brought about the Jerusalem Council (Ac 15)

The theme is a constant in Acts, and the tension between Judaism and Christianity is a major theme of the book.

3. We see this in their readiness to believe whispers among them about Paul (21)

- a. Charge of “apostasy”

teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to **forsake** Moses

- b. Two forms

- 1) Abandon circumcision
- 2) Abandon the customs

No doubt they were posting memes on Facebook about it...

We know that Paul doesn't advocate these things, but the whispers are easy to believe

- Jews viewed the mingling with Gentiles suspiciously
- Jerusalem Jews always wondered about diaspora (“Hellenized”) Jews — too loose, too casual

These suspicions highlight human tendencies: we like conformity, we don't like those bold people who venture outside the group, we like to be suspicious of “them” and what “they” say... (especially if “they” are people in authority)

II. The elders' solution (22-24)

- A. Note: the elders don't accuse Paul, they want to solve the problem
1. They harbored no suspicions of Paul ("extended the right hand of fellowship" Gal 2.9)
 2. They supported Paul's ministry, gloried in the work of God (20a)
- B. Yet Paul could not hide, the church would know of his presence — head off criticism
1. Participate in a vow
 2. Pay the expenses
 3. Show yourself to be "orderly"
- C. What it means to keep a vow
1. First, this isn't just making some kind of statement, "I solemnly swear..."
 2. The commentaries propose various rituals that might satisfy the details we have — mostly related to purification rites and the Nazirite vow
 - a. A Nazirite vow could be for a set period of time, otherwise thirty days
 - b. During vow, abstain from all alcoholic beverages, avoid any defiling contact, leave hair uncut
 - c. At end of vow, present an offering in the temple

"The offering comprised one he-lamb, one ewe-lamb, one ram, and accompanying food and drink offerings (Num. 6:14–15). Together with the 'hair of consecration' the whole was called a 'hair offering' (Mishnah, *Nāzîr* 6.5–6)."¹

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 406 n. 33.

d. Another Israelite could join the vow and pay the expenses

“this was regarded as a pious and charitable action”²

e. Note: the vow might have been slightly different from this, but the basic concepts remain: purification, offering of sacrifices

D. The crucial clarification (25)

1. The elders confirm the Council of Jerusalem decision regarding Gentiles (25)
2. They make no such stipulation for Christian Gentiles, they ask Paul to conform to a cultural expectation without a religious component
 - a. They say nothing (and Paul implies nothing) about the basis of salvation
 - b. They hold exclusively to salvation by faith
3. The requirements for Gentiles likewise affirm salvation by faith alone, but put some barriers on culture

The key difference: the barrier goes up when the cultural compliance puts you at odds with God.

ILLUSTRATION: I've mentioned our friend JP in the past — at his funeral I was asked if the Native shaman could participate.

- Willing to if the family desired it, but reminded them that JP was a Christian
- On the other hand, they had a custom at the burial of everyone taking turns at the shovel to fill the grave in after the ceremony — glad to participate

² Bruce, 406.

III. The willing participation (26)

A. Paul willingly went along with the suggestion

1. Luke records Paul being “under a vow” earlier (Ac 18.18)

Ac 18.18 ¶ Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow.

2. Even earlier, Paul had Timothy circumcised (Ac 16.3)

Ac 16.3 Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

B. Paul taught his philosophy in 1 Cor 9.19-23

1 Cor 9.19-23 ¶ For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;²¹ to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.²³ I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

C. The bottom line for Paul: the gospel

1. Would it hinder the gospel to offend the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem? Take the vow
2. Would it hinder the gospel to refuse to eat with Gentiles in Antioch? Eat with Gentiles

Conclusion:

Proposition: Christians shouldn't object to cultural elements of any social group they are among, if those elements don't directly contradict divine commands.

"In sum, what we see here is Paul being asked to act with cultural sensitivity to the Jewish context he now finds himself in, without compromising the gospel. He is quite willing to do so for the sake of the unity it may create. Oftentimes we may be asked, in ministry or in a given community, to engage in neutral practices that are culturally driven, not because we have to but because it may prevent unnecessary static from getting in the way of sharing the gospel or doing damage to the unity of the church. This represents a curb of freedoms."³

"Liberty is a great thing, but sometimes the expression of liberty can be counterproductive."⁴

Are you willing to cause someone to dismiss the gospel because you won't conform to non-sinful cultural expectations?

³ Bock, *Acts*, 648.

⁴ Bock, 649.