

Study 9 27/3/14 Christian Apologetics

Acts 22:1-21; 24:10-21

The speeches in Jerusalem and before Felix are a 'defence' (*apologia*; 22:1; 24:10; also the speech before Agrippa in 26:1-2, 24). Jesus warned his disciples not to prepare a defence for themselves (Luke 12:11; 21:14) because this would be their opportunity for testimony, or to give reasons (*apologia*) for their faith (as in 1 Pet. 3:15). The Holy Spirit, or the Lord himself, would give them what to say when the occasions arose. Clark Pinnock says, 'Apologetics...is an activity of the Christian mind which attempts to show that the gospel message is true in what it affirms. An apologist is one who is prepared to defend the message against criticism and distortion, and to give evidence of its credibility' (New Dictionary of Theology, p. 36).

The setting

Paul is welcomed by the church in Jerusalem and they thank God for all he has done. Paul shares in a Jewish purification ceremony, and, at the end of this, is noticed in the temple by some Asian Jews. They stir up strife and Paul is soon being mobbed and must be rescued by the local Roman tribune, Lysius. On the steps of their fortress, just North of the Temple Mount, Paul asks to speak *to the Jerusalem crowd* that has been in uproar.

The speech in Jerusalem

Moods of crowds thrive on ignorance and Paul's ability to negotiate with his guards, and then to speak their vernacular may surprise them into listening. He calls them brothers and fathers and confesses the upbringing he has shared with them. Even the zeal they are showing in being upset, he has shared with them. Paul must realise from experience, and from Christ's explanation (referred to later), that this does not endear him to them but they need to know that his life and action is all because of Christ.

He confesses his earlier *conflict with Christ* (22:1-5), effectively confessing his ignorance and sin. This parallels the constant reference in apostolic talks to 'you...' or 'they crucified him'. Paul, together with the yelling mobs in Pilate's hall, had willed Christ dead.

He describes his *conversion to Christ* (22:6-16), effectively, detailing the grace of God to him. The light he sees on the Damascus Road suggests the divine nature of his Visitor; the question he hears declares the undeserved love of Christ thinking of Paul's pain rather than his own; Paul's address to this voice as 'Lord' declares an unexpected new obedience. Ananias is introduced as a devout Jew to deflect any idea that he has drifted from respect for Israel; his sight is just as miraculously restored as his blindness had been inflicted; the Voice is identified as Israel's Righteous One (3:14; 7:52 with Isa. 32:1; 53:11; also 1 John 2:1), Israel's Messiah, and he is told that he will be a witness to others. So, he is told to wash away his sins in baptism into this Christ (cf. 'save yourselves' in 2:40). Here is where his life long love for justification by faith is born. In an instant he is clean, and the truth of this will never fade!

Paul must also explain his *redirection to Gentiles by Christ* (22:17-21). He thought his testimony would be effective and wanted to stay in Jerusalem, even arguing with Christ about this! But no, he must go to the Gentiles, and it is this that reignites the riot. The gospel must be preached as a witness to all nations, not because it will be effective everywhere but because it is true, and because God wants to make himself known and to leave each person without excuse.

Sequel and further scene setting

Next day, the tribune summons the *Jewish Council* and asks Paul to explain himself in their presence. Paul says he has a clear conscience with regard to their common faith. This does

not impress the High Priest! It seems that Paul cannot see any future in reasoning with them and decides to set the Council against itself by a debate about resurrection, a belief he holds in common with the Pharisee contingent on the Council. Predictably, they argue wildly, and the tribune worries that he will not be able to discover the facts or secure the safety of Paul. This is confirmed when he hears of a Jewish plot to kill Paul and he sends him on to Caesarea and to the local Governor Felix.

After 'no more than 12 days' after the riot in Jerusalem—24:11), the trial begins with Jewish Tertullus thanking the Governor for the 'peace' he has established (more generally known by subjected people as 'desolation', says Tacitus), and the 'reforms' made for their nation—hardly a genuine sentiment! He presents their accusation about this 'pest' who stirs up Jews everywhere, who is leader of a sect of Nazarenes, and, worst of all, has attempted to desecrate the temple (they say 'attempt' because it was only rumour that he had brought Greeks into the temple). He says it was they who tried to prevent the uproar until violently prevented by Lysias—the opposite of what Luke has reported. Paul begins his defence 'cheerfully' because Felix has been looking after Jews for a long time. He feels safer here than with his own nation.

The speech in Caesarea before Felix

The tone here is more formal than in Jerusalem. There is no informed public to address, just accusers and the Roman authorities. Simply, Paul shows that the charges against him can readily be proven false because the events are so recent (vv. 11-13). His tone is as precise as his accusers' is vague. One of Luke's motives for writing *Acts* is to show that Christian missionaries are demonstrably innocent of breaking Roman law, unless, as is later recognised, it be with regard to the worship of Caesar.

Paul concedes that he belongs to 'the Way' (vv. 14, 22; also 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4) or sect as termed by the Jews (vv. 14-16). For the apostles, this is the way 'of life' (2:28) or 'of the Lord' (13:10; 18:25-26), the way 'of salvation' (16:17). In this Way, Paul serves Israel's God, according to their Scriptures, and shares the same hope as most Jews (Sadducees excepted) that God will raise the dead to face final judgement (Dan. 12:2). Jews are trying to put distance between themselves and Christ, but Paul will have none of this. His objective in life (as claimed in Jerusalem) has been to keep a clear conscience before God and man. He may imply that every Jew who wants to have a clear conscience and be ready for this judgement should do as he has done and acknowledge Christ as Israel's Messiah and the world's Lord. As we see later (v. 25), he wants his Roman judges to have the same clear conscience.

Paul returns to the events that have brought him to trial (vv. 17-21). He was in Jerusalem fulfilling the moral (famine relief) and ceremonial obligations of his Jewishness when the melee began because of some Asian Jews. Interestingly, he does not raise the matter that triggered the riot—his call by Christ to go to the Gentiles. The wrongness in this is not his but his accusers and he is not here to accuse them! He astutely observes that the Asian Jews are not present to make their accusation. Perhaps the Jewish team had left them out because their wild claims would quickly have been quashed.

Paul brings the trial to what is central for him, and to the occasion of this trial being brought to Caesarea: he has raised the matter of resurrection of the dead with the Jewish Council (as in 23:6 and again in 26:8). In every sense, this is the reason for this trial. Christ's resurrection has changed everything for people of all nations (as in 17:31). Paul has born powerful witness to the victory of Christ.

The sequel

Felix sees conflicts between the letter from the Jerusalem tribune Lysius and what he has heard in court and defers the matter until Lysius can be present. The Governor belongs to this world: he gives Paul a 'fair go', but is looking for an expedient solution, one that will secure a bribe (v. 26) and also keep the Jews happy (v. 27). He may want to improve his education on Jewish matters, but talk about faith in Christ, righteousness, self-control and coming judgement, merely frighten him and he indefinitely postpones further enquiry.