

Sermon 68, The Kingdom Not Anti-Semitic, Acts 21:27-22:23

Proposition: Contrary to Jewish claims, God's Kingdom is not anti-Jewish, anti-Law, or anti-Temple, and we can be certain of that because Paul was incredibly Jewish, pro-law, and commissioned in the Temple to reach the Gentiles.

- I. The Asian Jews' Accusations, 21:27-31
 - A. Paul's Teaching Is Anti-Semitic, v. 28a
 - 1. Paul Is Anti-Jewish People
 - 2. Paul Is Anti-Law
 - 3. Paul Is Anti-Temple
 - B. Paul's Actions Have Defiled the Temple, v. 28b
- II. Paul Defends Himself Against the Accusation, 22:1-21
 - A. Main Point I: Paul Is Totally Jewish, vv. 1-21
 - 1. Paul's Jewish Credentials, vv. 1-5
 - 2. Paul's Encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, vv. 6-11
 - 3. Paul's Commissioning Through Ananias the Jew, vv. 12-16
 - 4. Paul's Commissioning in the Jewish Temple, vv. 17-21
 - a) Paul's Temple-Centered Piety, v. 17
 - b) Paul's Desire to Evangelize Jerusalem, vv. 18-20
 - c) Jesus' Peremptory Command, v. 21
 - B. Main Point II: Paul Is Witness to the Gentiles, vv. 15, 21
- III. The Jewish Response: Utter Rejection of Paul and Everything he Stands for, vv. 22-23
 - A. Paul's Jewishness
 - B. Paul's Gentile Witness

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are in the midst of one of the most concentrated passages of Luke's narrative. Suddenly, the events are coming thick and fast, and it would be easy for us to lose track of where we are and what is going on. If you remember, the Spirit compelled Paul to go to Jerusalem. There, the local elders met him and told him that he needed to prove himself to the local church by sponsoring four men in a vow. That process was nearly complete when Paul was spotted in the Temple by Jews from Asia, perhaps from the Ephesus area, who instantly instigated a riot over it. Paul is rescued from the riot by the Roman garrison stationed adjacent to the Temple grounds in the Antonia fortress, only to have to defend himself five times in a row in speeches to various audiences. That process occupies the next five chapters. I want you to realize that Paul the prisoner defending the gospel and himself as proclaimer of it is important to Luke. In fact, it's just as important as Paul the missionary preaching the gospel and planting churches. For the rest of Acts, Paul doesn't plant any more

churches or go on any more missionary journeys. He is a prisoner, and he gives speeches that clarify why he should not be a prisoner and why his ministry was no threat to the Empire.

We encounter the first of those speeches in our text this evening. Paul stands up to defend himself against a charge that we, anachronistically, could label “anti-Semitism.” He defends himself against this charge with two major points: First, that he is incredibly Jewish, of the most strict and conservative kind; second, that he did not choose to become a witness to the Gentiles, but was called to it by God. Thus, he is not anti-Semitic, both because he is Jewish (even, as he says in the next chapter, a Pharisee) and because he really wanted to minister to his own people in Jerusalem.

I. The Asian Jews’ Accusations, 21:27-31

We start by looking at the specific contents of the accusations leveled by the Asian, possibly Ephesian, Jews. They relate both to teaching and to behavior.

A. Paul’s Teaching Is Anti-Semitic, v. 28a

The first one concerns his teaching, and with fervor denounces him as “teaching everyone everywhere” anti-Semitic slurs. Now, Paul himself, and Luke too, are more than capable of making some very bold claims about how many people Paul was able to reach. He is said, for instance, to have ministered so effectively “that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). So when the Ephesian Jews start yelling that everyone everywhere has heard anti-Semitic things from Paul, their lie has an element of truth within it. Let’s break it down a bit more and talk about what the specific charges are so that we can see how carefully Paul swats them all away in his defense speech.

1. Paul Is Anti-Jewish People

The first specific charge is that Paul teaches against “the people,” that is, the Jewish people. This is the heart of their charge, which is why they mention it first. As they understand (or rather, as they misunderstand) the apostle, he is simply an anti-Semite. In his mind, Jews are bad and Jews can do nothing right and everyone ought to beware of Jews and anything they touch. That’s why they riled up the crowd to try to kill Paul; in their minds, or at least in their words, it was kill or be killed, and they were going to kill Paul before he killed them.

2. Paul Is Anti-Law

Further, they charge that Paul taught regularly against the law. Now, this is an accusation that dogged Paul through his life. Shoot, the Jerusalem elders had repeated it the previous week! Paul does indeed use phrases like “not under the law” and “dead to the law,” and one can see how that started rumors that he is opposed to the law altogether. But in reality, as his letters make clear, Paul was in favor of God’s moral law and careful, conscientious obedience to it. What he was not in favor of was the thought that the Levitical system is still valid for salvation. Of course, when the Ephesian Jews said “Law” they did not mean “God’s moral principles.” They meant “the entire Levitical system as currently practiced in Israel.” It can be compared to the faction in our country that calls a Trump voter “a threat to our democracy.” They don’t mean that by voting for their preferred candidate, the voter is overthrowing democracy. That’s obviously nonsense. What they mean is that the candidate is so opposed to the status quo that if he gains power, he is likely

in their judgment to destroy the system as it exists and make himself sole dictator or the like. In the same way, these Asian partisans accused Paul of standing against the law because they regarded the current version of it practiced in Jerusalem as being by definition exactly what the Torah intended. Thus, for Paul to challenge it in any way was enough to prove that he was anti-law, at least in their minds.

3. Paul Is Anti-Temple

Finally, the Asian Jews allege that Paul is anti-Temple. According to them, he has taught everyone everywhere “against” the Temple. What exactly does that mean? Presumably he has been teaching that God does not dwell in temples made with hands, including the Jerusalem one which He originally authorized and formerly dwelt in. This does not mean that Paul is “against” the Temple, in the sense that he wishes to destroy it or close it as a place of worship. After all, at the moment when the rioters catch him, he is actually in the temple making use of its facilities for the worship of God.

B. Paul’s Actions Have Defiled the Temple, v. 28b

The Asian Jews also accuse Paul of putting into practice his anti-Semitic views by defiling the temple. They say that he brought Gentiles into it, not because they saw him do so but because they saw him around town with Trophimus the Ephesian.

In other words, brothers and sisters, all four charges are false. Some of them contain a highly distorted version of the truth, but the overall reality is that not one is correct and accurate, even so far as it goes. Certainly none of the charges represents a nuanced account of the teachings and activities of Paul.

Does that actually matter to the Jewish mob who is attempting to kill Paul in full view of the Roman fortress beside the Temple complex? Apparently not in the slightest.

II. Paul Defends Himself Against the Accusation, 22:1-21

Thankfully, the Romans swoop in to deliver him, and at that point Paul asks the commander for permission to address the crowd. The commander grants it, and Paul responds to the four charges by providing a biographical sketch of himself. Now, why doesn’t he respond by saying “I am Jewish, I keep the law, I was worshiping in the Temple just like you do five minutes ago, for Heaven’s sake, and I have never defiled the Temple with a Gentile sinner and never will”? The answer, of course, is that that’s what he would be expected to say. He is dealing with a mob that hates him and doesn’t trust him. If he simply denied their accusations, they would believe that in addition to the four original charges, they could add a fifth: Lying. So instead of defending himself with a flat denial of the ridiculous charges, or a nuanced exposition of his attitude toward Judaism, Law, and Temple, Paul launches into his life story. Those who know what has happened to him will, he reckons (or at least hopes), be ready to respond favorably to his pleas for them to repent and believe in Jesus.

A. Main Point I: Paul Is Totally Jewish, vv. 1-21

Thus, the first point that he raises to counter this accusation of anti-Semitism is simply to say that actually, he is totally, utterly, and completely Jewish. He is not half-Jewish, not an adult convert, not a secular Jew who recently returned to the ancestral faith. It’s as if he said “My name is

Rabbi Abraham Goldberg, and I am carrying a package of matzoh bread under one arm and a Torah scroll under the other. You are free to guess my religion however you want.” Paul was more Jewish than our fictional Rabbi A. Goldberg. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. And he goes through it at length here, though of course he kicks off his proof by addressing the audience in their native Yiddish — I mean, their native Aramaic. If he knows Aramaic, the conclusion is obvious: He must be Jewish. But his Jewishness doesn’t stop with his ability to speak the language of Palestine.

1. Paul’s Jewish Credentials, vv. 1-5

Rather, he just puts it flat out: “I am a Jew.” There is no need to guess his origin. The audience isn’t left saying “Wait — Hirsch? Is that a Jewish name?” Rather, he makes it easy for them. He describes his background further: from Tarsus, but brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel. That was a name that they all knew, Gamaliel being one of the top theologians of Judaism at that time. It’s as though you were examining a visitor to our church on his theology and heard him say “John MacArthur was my Ph.D. supervisor.” All right, then. The visitor is solid. No need to question him further on what his theological views might be!

Well, Paul adds further, lest they didn’t know where Gamaliel stood, that Gamaliel is not a liberal in any sense. He is not pushing the boundaries or attempting to redefine what Judaism is and could be. He represents the strictest sect within Judaism. What the OPC is to American Presbyterianism, what the Society of Jesus is to the Roman Catholic Church, what Ron Paul is to the U.S. Senate, is what Paul & Gamaliel were to first-century Judaism. What’s more, he points out, he too used to hate Jesus of Nazareth and “The Way” that the Antiochenes had dubbed “Christianity.”

In other words, if you’re Jewish, you have to give this guy a hearing. Obviously, this whole scene is taking place in the temple courts, and so pretty much everyone involved (other than the Roman garrison) is Jewish.

2. Paul’s Encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, vv. 6-11

But Paul then goes to describe his life-changing encounter with Jesus. There was no one more Jewish than Saul of Tarsus; there would be no one more Christian than St. Paul. Paul describes how he underwent a death and resurrection experience, being blinded and led by the hand in a kind of death, and then rising, undergoing baptism, and being essentially a new man, alive from the dead. In other words, what made the difference was not something in Paul’s background, but in his experience as an adult. He suddenly changed, because meeting Jesus will do that to you.

3. Paul’s Commissioning Through Ananias the Jew, vv. 12-16

But though he had encountered the risen Christ and would never be the same, Paul remained in a thoroughly Jewish milieu. Ananias was a devout man, a Jewish man, one well spoken of by all the Jews in Damascus. In other words, Paul is telling his audience, becoming a Christian did not make me any less Jewish, or any less comfortable in Jewish company. In fact, as soon as I had met Christ, the first person who came to me was a devout, law-keeping Jewish man. And he was even a miracle-worker! Simultaneously with his miracle working, though, Ananias commissioned Paul to be a witness — the very thing that the angry crowd regarded as un-Jewish.

Paul is saying “It’s all of a piece. My Jewishness and my obedience to Jesus as His witness are not opposed to each other; they actually cohere with each other. Being a follower of Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of Judaism, and Ananias and I experience no contradictions in our lived experience.”

What about the statement that baptism washes away sins? The short answer is that it does — symbolically, and in that sense really. The blood of Jesus is the only thing that can cleanse from sin, but Jesus has appointed baptism to be a sign and seal of cleansing from sin too. Baptism is not the efficient cause of salvation (that would be Jesus), but it is a symbolic, exemplary, instrumental cause of salvation.

4. Paul’s Commissioning in the Jewish Temple, vv. 17-21

Well, Paul is not standing on the steps, surrounded by tough men with spears, so that he can give a discourse on baptism. And so he rushes on through an indeterminate amount of time to a scene not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. He recounts to this hostile crowd standing in the front of the Temple that the Temple was actually extremely significant to his life and piety, even since becoming a Christian.

a) Paul’s Temple-Centered Piety, v. 17

Thus, he describes returning to Jerusalem and praying in the Temple. During this prayer, he entered a state of ecstasy, also translated as “trance” or “visionary state”. The experience was a profound one, and the fact that it took place in the Temple highlights that Paul is not in the least anti-Temple, even after conversion. In fact, it was in the Temple that he met Jesus.

Anyone in here ever had a mystical experience? Paul did, on at least two occasions — this one, and the one in which he was caught up to the third heaven. Mystical experiences are not foreign to biblical Christianity. We do not live for them, but we do not deny or suppress them either.

Again, though, the “old” Jewish part of Paul and the “new,” Christian part are inseparable. In the Temple, he has a vision of Christ telling him to get out of Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles. To the hostile crowd, he’s making the point that he did not desire to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and that in fact, he fought it. It was all Jesus’ idea!

b) Paul’s Desire to Evangelize Jerusalem, vv. 18-20

Paul argued with the Lord and told Him “The Jerusalem establishment will know my conversion is real. I am well-positioned to reach them.” He did not draw the conclusion, but that is clearly where the premises he puts forward are heading.

c) Jesus’ Peremptory Command, v. 21

But though Paul may have been yet another in a long string of reluctant prophets, Christ dealt with him the same way He dealt with all the previous reluctant prophets — by dispatching him anyway. No excuses were accepted. The reluctant prophet, the Hebrew of the Hebrews, was going to the Gentiles.

What is Paul telling the crowd? “I didn’t go to the Gentiles because I’m some kind of anti-Semite. I went to the Gentiles because my Jewish Lord told me that I had to.” He’s not saying that he dislikes ministry to the Gentiles — but he is definitely dissociating himself from

the decision. It was not Paul's big dream to bring in the Gentiles, though, as he shows in Romans 15, the idea is actually all over the Hebrew Bible.

B. Main Point II: Paul Is Witness to the Gentiles, vv. 15, 21

So the second main point of this defense speech emerges: Paul is Christ's witness to the Gentiles. It is his business to speak about what he saw and heard, and to speak about it to the Gentiles far away from the Promised Land. In Paul's mind, and Paul's experience, this is utterly compatible with his deeply Jewish roots, family, habits, and culture. He is a Jew who ministers to Gentiles. That is why they saw him in the city with Trophimus the Ephesian, why they had seen him in Asia, and why they had caught him worshiping in the Temple.

III. The Jewish Response: Utter Rejection of Paul and Everything he Stands for, vv. 22-23

Did the speech convince them? Not at all. In their minds, the speech did not prove his credentials as a philo-Semite. Far from it.

A. Paul's Jewishness

They rejected his Jewishness; to them, he was emphatically not one of them. He no longer belonged to the club.

B. Paul's Gentile Witness

And they rejected his witness and the Kingdom which he served. Again, to them, anyone who spent his life witnessing to Christ was a bad Jew. Anyone who served Christ as Lord was a bad Jew.

Well, that's a sorry note on which to end a sermon. Where do we go from here? And how do we relate this message to Luke's overall point that the Kingdom is certain?

The answer is simple. From here we make the obvious application that the Kingdom is not opposed to Jews and Judaism, as they were originally designed by God. We also recognize that the Kingdom is, for a time, going to be rejected by its forebears. Just as Britain initially rejected the United States, going so far as to fight the War of 1812 with us, but later accepted the USA and now regards us as its closest ally, so right now Judaism rejects Christianity. But someday, that will change. Someday, the fullness of Israel will be saved. Then it will be obvious to all Jews, as it is to all Christians, that Paul's Jewishness and his call to the Gentiles are perfectly compatible with each other.

How can we see the certainty of the Kingdom here? We see that despite the opposition of his own people, Paul insisted that he really had been sent out by Jesus as a witness. Jesus really did rule Paul. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus stands to this day as one of the historical improbabilities that litter the path of Christianity. How and why would Saul of Tarsus, Hebrew of Hebrews, go to be apostle to the Gentiles without a command from King Jesus? There is no good answer to that question. The fact that Paul bucked his own people, forfeited his own position, and went off to the hated and unclean Gentiles, spending his life planting and nourishing the church, is irrefutable. And it is inexplicable without reference to the reign of Christ stopping him on the Damascus Road and redirecting the persecutor, making him the wise master builder of the church.

So worship Jesus as Lord. Without Paul, you and I wouldn't be here today. But Paul would never have become an apostle without the work of Jesus ruling, directing, and commanding him to go and be a witness describing what he had seen and heard of the Son of God. Submit to God's Kingdom; love Jesus; and live for Him. Amen.