

Acts 21:17-26 [63]-CONFRONTING the ELDERS!

PRELIMS. Paul has come back from his 3rd Missionary Journey and has been ‘told’ by his Xn brothers, at Tyre and Caesarea ‘Don’t go to Jerusalem, they will assault you’, but Paul still goes, knowing the Lord has called him to go.

The SITUATION FACING PAUL?

In every area of life there are **differences of opinion** on various matters – and the Church has probably more subjects to have an opinion on than any other institution. In these verses we have a **wonderful example** of how Church Courts and indeed disputes in any area of life are to be handled and settled.

Paul was coming ‘home’ to the **HQ** of the Church, the Jerusalem Jews. You might remember that Jerusalem was the church that did **not fully obey** the command of the Lord to reach out to the ‘ends of the earth’ with the gospel. The **Antioch** church was the church who sent out missionaries to the unbelieving world, to those who never heard the gospel at all. God wonderfully blessed the Antioch church because of its **obedience, zeal, love** particularly for the **lost** nations – so it grew and grew! Although Jer was still the **official** centre of Xnity, Antioch was the **hub/bub** of Xn **activity-therefore** it was at Antioch not Jer, where the name ‘Xn’ was 1st **coined!** Antioch Xns were not so **insular** as the Jerusalem church.

Paul was the evangelist to the **Gentiles** (the Antioch church sent out Paul and Barnabas some years before this). Peter was the evangelist to the Jews. He too went **travelling** but focussed his ministry on Jews [Gal 2:8]. Both churches grew, but the Antioch church became more **cosmopolitan!** **APP** This shows the need for **different gifts** in the Church. We have the **one gospel** but how we present it various groups may be different. Paul address to **pagans** in Athens/Lystra/Derbe was completely different from his address to Jews in the **synagogues!**

Both Peter and Paul preached the **same gospel**—‘Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved’ – so there was **no conflict** whatever among the Jews/Gentiles as to **how** people are saved. They became Xns by faith in X as the promised Messiah, the Saviour not just of Jews but of the whole world.

But regarding **how** they should **live** from now on, there was great contention. This matter had already been raised 8 years ago at the **Jerusalem Council!** And still there were problems!

This was because the **Jews** had a **background of tradition** which was very **precious** to them. The problem was that some of these traditions were **cultural** and **not spiritual!** The Jews understood that their **whole** way of life was **sacrosanct!**

Nothing was ever to change. They were wrong. Even under Moses and the Law God Himself ordered many changes [Eg Deu 15]. So, the Jews **believed** their **traditional** and **cultural practises** and **customs** were the **only** proper and true way to live and serve God. And now, as the Messiah had come, a Jew, they were **even more established** in the belief that the Jewish customs/practises were the **only correct** ones!

But there were now true believers, true Xns, among Gentiles as well! The Gentiles did **not** have the same **traditions** that the Jews had. The Gentiles saw nothing wrong with many of their **customs/practises** such as eating meat offered to idols (just as we would see nothing wrong with that either!) It was **not** a command from God but a matter of conscience for each person. Of course many Gentile practises were sinful and opposed God’s command and had to be stopped immediately. So there **was a conflict** regarding how they should **live out** their faith. The Jewish Xns, were more **strict** in what they believed was the **only** right way to live to the glory of God. The Gentiles on the other hand, without having a Biblical spiritual tradition were more full of the **Spirit** rather than **rules/regulations/code** of the Jews “*the letter kills but the Spirit gives life”*[2Cor3:6]

“having died to that which held us captive...we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit”[Rom 7:6]

Now Paul had met James (leader/moderator) before. On the first time Paul had a hard time of it for *“he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all **afraid** of him, for they did **not believe** that he was a disciple”*[9:26]. James was one of them! So there might have been a bit of **tension** in this meeting – both parties coming as Stott says, with ‘fruits of their own missions’. Some see in their writings Paul ‘by faith alone’, James *“faith without works is dead”* a tension - but there is no contradiction!

RECEPTION and PROPOSAL

*“The brothers received us **gladly**”*[17]! Good start! *Then **greetings!** *Then Paul *“related one by one the things that **God** had done among the Gentiles”*[19] Note: God, not Paul! It was God that converted and changed these people albeit *“through his ministry”*[19]. *Another encouragement – mutual **rejoicing!** *“when they heard it they **glorified** God”*[20] They acknowledged immediately the conversion of the Gentiles.

Then James outlined the problem *“many thousands”* of Jews *“have believed. They are **all zealous** for the **law**”*[20] And you Paul, have been teaching them the opposite, or so they think so! *“they have been told that **you teach**...to forsake Moses...**not to circumcise** their children or walk according to our **customs**. What then is to be done?”*[21,22]. * Now Paul’s ministry was **evangelism**. His ministry emphasised **entry** into the Kingdom, how to **become** a Xn, not on the **customs** of the Jewish nation. The Jews (albeit believers) were still very much concerned with the customs of their past traditions which they **associated** with God. For Jews it was necessary to **look like** Jews. Again and again they had to be rebuked for their concern about **outward appearance!** In looking for a king they ‘rejected’ David and desired Saul who was *“a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he”*

[1Sam9:2] **Image** was important. **APP** The same today, your face has to fit the culture – and the TV screen!

The **nub** of the issue. (1) **Not** about the way of salvation, Paul and James were agreed thru X alone. It was about how to live **after** being saved. (2) **Not** about how Jews should live in **Jerusalem** among their **own folk** (no need to unnecessarily to offend the locals) but how Jews should live “*among the Gentiles*”[21] **No** evidence Paul taught **Jews** should **not** circumcise their children, it was **Gentiles** who did not need to (3) **Not** about the **moral law** but **customs**. It a word it was about **separating** ‘cultural traditions’, albeit from religious convictions, from God’s commands articulated in Scripture!

Lovely to see both groups **conciliatory**! Jews **acknowledged** God used Paul and truly rejoiced over the new converts. No jealousy! To **heal** the problem, they had a wonderful **proposal** and asked Paul to accept “*Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men under a vow...purify yourself. Pay their expenses...shave their heads*”[24] ‘Join them and let them **see** that you are **with** them in their cultural practises and that the rumours are not true’! “*Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told...but that you yourself also live in observance of the laws*”[24]! Paul was **glad to oblige**.

This was **conciliatory**, **not compromise** – ie, it was **not** the **sacrificing** of a **doctrine** or a **moral** principle! Paul believed the **unity** and **peace** of the Church was far **more important** than a division over practises! “*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*”[Rom 12:18] “*submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ*”[Eph 5:21] “*all of you, be subject to one another*”[1P5:5] “*I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord*” did **not** mean ‘give up your **convictions**’, but be **peaceable** about your differences’! “*Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of...peace will be with you*”