

Sermon 69, The Christian's Dual Citizenship, Acts 22:22-23:1

Proposition: The Christian is simultaneously a citizen of an earthly polity and of the Kingdom of Heaven, and our earthly citizenship is a platform from which to witness to Jesus.

- I. Paul Protected by his Roman Citizenship, vv. 22-29
 - A. Probable Cause
 - 1. Paul Discovered at the Center of a Riot, 21:30
 - 2. Paul's Speech Makes the Riot Worse, 22:22-23
 - B. Investigation
 - 1. Original Plan: Examination by Torture, 22:24
 - 2. Intervention: Paul Declares his Citizenship, 22:25
 - 3. New Plan: Examination by Sanhedrin, 22:30
 - C. Protection
 - 1. From Torture
 - 2. From Jewish Hostility
 - D. Paul's Roman Citizenship Gives him Opportunity to Testify to Jesus
- II. Paul Announces his Kingdom Citizenship, 23:1
 - A. Paul's Central Claim, v. 1
 - 1. I'm a Kingdom Citizen
 - 2. Before God
 - 3. In all Good Conscience
 - 4. To this Day
 - B. Paul's Kingdom Claims Generate Riots Among People who don't want to submit to Jesus
 - C. Paul's Kingdom Citizenship Gives him Authority to Testify to Jesus

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, dual citizenship is a weird concept. How can someone be the product of, and loyal to, two nations simultaneously? How can one be equally at home in Britain and America, or in South Africa and New Zealand? It's a question that the political theorists struggle to answer, for ultimately, it is a particular application of the one and the many, or the problem of diversity and unity. But regardless of how the theorists have tried to conceptualize this problem, we have a concrete example of it before us in the text this evening. Paul claims two different citizenships back-to-back — citizenship of Rome, and citizenship of God's Kingdom. The two are in play simultaneously. Paul's Roman citizenship protects him from murder at the hands of an outraged Jerusalem mob; Paul's Kingdom citizenship gives him the authority to keep saying the thing that made the mob mad in the first place, which is that he is a good citizen of the Kingdom of God. From Paul's story, we will see

this point: The Christian is a citizen of an earthly polity and of the Kingdom of Heaven. He has a dual citizenship, and that citizenship gives him a place from which to testify to Jesus, and an authorization to testify too. Paul also shows us a model of how to balance these competing loyalties and memberships: We use our earthly citizenship to serve our heavenly.

I. Paul Protected by his Roman Citizenship, vv. 22-29

We left Paul last time as he was giving a speech proving that he was not anti-Semitic. He had just gotten to the part where Jesus commissioned him to go to the Gentiles when the crowd started to riot once again, shaking their clothes at him, throwing dust in the air, and generally doing everything possible to indicate their violent disagreement with his words.

A. Probable Cause

That, in turn, created what our legal system refers to as “probable cause.” Here’s the reality:

1. Paul Discovered at the Center of a Riot, 21:30

Paul had first come to the notice of law enforcement for being at the center of a riot. It was clear that the Jerusalem mob was angry and rioting precisely because of him. In fact, they were attempting to beat him to death when the soldier on lookout noticed and notified the commanding officer, who came out personally to intervene and prevent any mob murders from happening right in front of his command post. Then the officer tried to discover why exactly the mob was trying to beat Paul to death. Paul just said, “Can I speak to the crowd?”

“Sure,” said the tribune. So Paul gave the speech we looked at together last week.

2. Paul’s Speech Makes the Riot Worse, 22:22-23

Unfortunately, the speech was given in Aramaic, which Claudius Lysias most likely could not understand. Even if he could understand the language, the speech has a lot of inside baseball that someone unfamiliar with Judaism wouldn’t necessarily be able to follow. All the tribune could see is that Paul’s speech, far from settling the crowd, had made it all worse. Originally, when the Roman soldiers came pouring out of the fortress, “they stopped beating Paul.” Now, though, right in front of the soldiers, the mob starts literally howling for Paul’s blood after the speech. Whatever this guy who looks like an Egyptian terrorist said, it did not exactly calm down the rioters.

B. Investigation

Claudius Lysias is like, “This guy is some kind of major malefactor. I don’t know what his deal is, but I’m definitely gonna find out.”

1. Original Plan: Examination by Torture, 22:24

The soldiers grab Paul again and haul him into the barracks, where the tribune gives orders that he be examined by torture. This would have been an absolutely brutal procedure; the commentators uniformly point out that lots of people actually died from being scourged by this nasty whip that had pieces of metal and bone tied to its lashes. The soldiers, nothing if not efficient, actually have Paul stretched out for the whips before he is able to say something.

2. Intervention: Paul Declares his Citizenship, 22:25

“I’m a Roman citizen.” This is a total bombshell. The soldiers who were getting the whipping ready stand back, and the centurion and the tribune start to sweat a little bit. They had completely violated Paul’s rights, and they could see the prospect of getting in major trouble for it.

3. New Plan: Examination by Sanhedrin, 22:30

However, the original probable cause has not disappeared. Citizen or not, Paul was still found at the center of a riot and then gave a speech that made the riot even worse. So the Roman law enforcement officers still need to find out why Paul was starting riots and what crime or crimes he might be guilty of. Rather than examining him under torture, though, they decide to call the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, and see if they can shed some light on the subject of why Paul is so offensive to the local mob.

C. Protection

So what is Luke’s point here? Why this material on Paul’s citizenship in the Roman Empire? The first thing to see is that Paul’s citizenship affords him protection.

1. From Torture

He is protected from torture. He does not have to undergo the flesh- and health-shattering operation of being brutally scourged. This is a great example of what a strong state does: Its institutional arm reaches out and in the remotest backwaters protects its citizens from mistreatment at the hands of foreigners and also at the hands of its own officials. Paul had probably already written that the state was a minister of God for good. Now, as he is taken off the whipping post without having been whipped, he can see for himself that sometimes the state is a net plus.

2. From Jewish Hostility

The other thing the state did was protect him from the hostility of his own people. They were completely outraged against him. They wanted to kill him, and after he spoke they wanted to kill him again! But the Roman Empire said “Not so fast. You can’t kill one of our citizens just because he says things you don’t like.” Imperial Rome is not known for its robust defense of free speech. But it did believe in justice, and recognized the utter injustice of letting the mob beat someone to death for uttering sentiments they disliked.

D. Paul’s Roman Citizenship Gives him Opportunity to Testify to Jesus

But the other thing Luke is showing us is that Paul’s Roman citizenship gives him an opportunity to testify to Jesus. If this isn’t clear enough in the course of the story, it should become very clear through what Jesus says in v. 11 of the next chapter: “Good job, Paul. Thank you for testifying to me here in Jerusalem.” That’s how Jesus interpreted this whole arrest sequence — as Paul testifying boldly to Him.

Brothers and sisters, thank God for the United States of America and the citizenship within it that we enjoy. In some circles it is fashionable to denounce the corruption and misery of our republic. Much of that is warranted. But it is also one-sided. Our republic still provides the same kind of protection from mob violence and torture that Paul enjoyed under Claudius and Nero, and for us to fail to acknowledge that fact is simple ingratitude. We owe our lives, and our

wealth, to our country. Paul was proud of his hometown; he looked to and spoke of Tarsus as “no mean city.” Paul was a patriot. And we should be too, because the fifth commandment requires it.

So thank God for the protection of earthly citizenship. And utilize, as Paul did, the opportunity to testify to Jesus that said earthly citizenship gives to you.

II. Paul Announces his Kingdom Citizenship, 23:1

But Luke doesn't leave it there. He goes on to describe Paul's Kingdom citizenship a couple of verses later. You see, the book of Acts is not primarily about the Kingdom of Rome. Luke is not some sort of provincial Livy or Polybius. He is not interested in the triumphs of Caesar. He is interested in the triumphs of Christ. He is writing about the certainty of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom intersects at points with Caesar's dominions. But Caesar's kingdom and God's Kingdom are two different entities. Caesar rules a geographical territory; Jesus rules a spiritual one. Caesar gains territory by conquering geopolitical entities; Jesus gains people by taking them out of Satan's dominion and bringing them into his.

A. Paul's Central Claim, v. 1

To the Romans Paul issued his claim to be a Roman citizen. To the citizens of God's earthly Kingdom of Israel, Paul issued his claim to be a Kingdom citizen. He was saying “I have been taken out of Satan's dominion and brought under Jesus' dominion.”

1. I'm a Kingdom Citizen

Now, no English translation that I could find says “I have lived as a citizen.” The vast majority simply say “I have lived my life.” NIV is slightly closer, with its “fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience.” But the root word here in Greek is *politeuma*, which comes from the root word *polis* or city. Just as you can see the root word “city” inside the longer word “citizen,” so you can see the root word *polis* inside the longer word *politeuma*. The word can indeed simply mean “live” as well as “live as a citizen.” But based on the context, I am certain that Paul and Luke intend us to understand this word to mean “live as a citizen,” and not a citizen of Rome but a citizen of God's Kingdom.

I say this for two major contextual reasons. First is what we just looked at — the incident immediately previous, where Paul announces his citizenship in Rome. That would obviously incline us to think that Luke is going to continue the theme of citizenship here if he can, rather than simply saying “live” with a word that could also mean “live as a citizen.”

The second reason is the reaction this claim provokes. No sooner have the words left Paul's lips then the high priest commands that he be struck on the mouth. Why?

Many of the commentators say only “It's not clear why the high priest is so upset about Paul's claim to have a good conscience.” But if we read this word as meaning “live as a citizen,” it is easy to see why the high priest is so incensed.

You see, when Paul says that he has lived as a Kingdom citizen, all over the Eastern Mediterranean, witnessing to Jesus, he is saying this: Citizenship in God's Kingdom is no longer confined to Palestine or defined by the Levitical system you represent, Caiaphas. Citizenship in God's Kingdom is a matter of believing in Jesus. Or, as Paul had recently put it to the Romans,

“He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart.” To put it mildly, Caiaphas would have disagreed with such sentiments. Had he read Romans? Maybe not. But he knew enough to know that when Paul said “I’m a Kingdom citizen,” he disagreed. Strongly.

That brings up the question: Are you a Kingdom citizen? Have you lived as one who obeys Jesus and looks to Him as your ultimate king? Are you Christian first and American second, just as Paul was Christian first and Roman second? Paul was not simply saying “I’ve lived my life.” We’ve all lived our lives. That’s not a controversial statement. But you can imagine a bigoted right-wing immigration hawk confronted with someone who’s obviously Mexican and speaks English with a thick Spanish accent. The Mexican says “I have lived as an *Americano* for my whole life.”

What would our immigration hawk do? He would be furious! Just as furious, indeed, as a CNN panelist confronted by Donald Trump saying “I have done more for our democracy than you ever will.”

Paul was a Kingdom citizen. He was not afraid to say so. And that drove the high priest nuts. In fact, it will drive nuts everyone who thinks that they have a lock on God and can control who He favors and who He lets into His Kingdom. That’s what the High Priest thought.

It will also drive nuts everyone who thinks that earthly citizenship is ultimate: “If you worship Jesus, you are not Chinese.” Paul ran into that in Thessalonica: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). There was in truth nothing un-Roman about the gospel. But the Thessalonian Jews wanted to paint it as un-Roman in order to prevent the Gentile Thessalonians from believing in it. Same with the High Priest. He thought that he was in charge of God’s Kingdom, and in his mind Paul had been stripped of his citizenship a long time ago. When Paul said otherwise, he hated it.

2. Before God

But Paul goes on: the one who evaluates my claim to citizenship, he said, is God — not you, Caiaphas, and not this council. You don’t control God’s Kingdom; He does. And therefore, Paul is not afraid to invoke the name of God as the one who agrees with him about his citizenship.

Do you live as a Kingdom citizen before God? Are you more concerned with what the neighbors think or with what God thinks?

3. In all Good Conscience

Paul further adds that he has lived in all good conscience. His internal moral sense does not accuse him.

Paul thought the conscience very important, and he made every effort “to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men” (Acts 24:16). How do you keep a clean conscience? You dirty it as little as possible, and clean it as much as possible. That’s how. Caiaphas, according to Josephus, was a violent, greedy man. Someone has even dug up a parody of Psalm 24, “Lift up your heads, you mighty gates,” that tells the gates to be lifted up so that greedy Caiaphas and his minions can go into the temple and eat God’s meat. It’s pretty horrible. Paul knew that Caiaphas’ conscience was no cleaner than Hillary Clinton’s. How about yours?

4. To this Day

Indeed, Paul says, this is something he has kept up throughout his life right to the present moment. He is still a Roman citizen, and he is still a Kingdom citizen. Can you say the same?

B. Paul's Kingdom Claims Generate Riots Among People who don't want to submit to Jesus

Now, here's one point Luke is making: Paul's claim to be a citizen of the Kingdom makes those who don't want to submit to Jesus crazy.

In our country forty years ago, a theological controversy broke out over "lordship salvation." Some pastors and theologians were teaching that one could accept Jesus as Savior, thus getting a get-out-of-hell-free card, without submitting to Him as Lord. That is complete and total garbage, of course. Paul specifically said that he proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom because he wanted to avoid the impression that salvation was not related to submission. The good news is not merely forgiveness of sins and life with God in Heaven. The good news is also that you get out of Satan's kingdom and into Jesus' Kingdom. And once you're in Jesus' Kingdom, you have to obey Him because He is your King. That's ultimately why the Jews were rioting about Paul: They didn't want to submit to Jesus, and Paul insisted that they needed to.

C. Paul's Kingdom Citizenship Gives him Authority to Testify to Jesus

Finally, we see the ultimate point Luke is making: Paul's Kingdom citizenship is what gave him the authority to testify to Jesus. He was an ambassador of Christ, God making His appeal through Paul. That would not have been possible unless Paul was a citizen of God's Kingdom. Imagine Biden naming a Brazilian citizen as U.S. ambassador to Australia. That would make no sense, because only an American can speak for America. Only a Christian can speak for Christ. That's what Paul was, and that's what he was doing. He used his Roman citizenship as a platform to preserve his life and health, but his goal was not ultimately to build Rome but to build the Kingdom of Jesus.

As I said last week, the very existence and work of Paul as a wise master builder seeking to build the Kingdom of God gives us more certainty about what we have been taught. The story of Paul shows us that this is all real. If it weren't true, Paul wouldn't have been working for it. But he did work for it, and it is true. So believe. Live as a Christian citizen in the midst of this earthly kingdom, seeking first God's Kingdom and righteousness. And all these things will be added to you. Amen.