

Sermon 74, Resurrection Hope on Trial, Pt. 3, Acts 26

“The only real defense available to Paul and to the church as a whole is that of proclamation.”
— B.R. Gaventa, 348

Proposition: Paul’s testimony before Agrippa shows that the kingdom’s defense is proclamation.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to the last of Paul’s defense speeches here at the end of Acts. In this speech, Paul says that he is setting out to defend himself against the accusations of the Jews. It’s rather an odd claim, because the Jews are not there, and it’s not a formal trial at all. In fact, it is just an occasion for Agrippa and Bernice to hear from Festus’ most interesting prisoner. So, in light of that reality, Paul says a few things about himself and his early life, and then describes his conversion and his career as an itinerant evangelist and apostle. But though he is ostensibly sharing biography, the audience is well aware that his real goal is not merely for them to acquit him from the Jews’ charges (something they can’t do anyway, of course, because at this point he’s already headed to Rome for a final trial), but to persuade them to believe in Jesus.

Why does Paul take a defense speech and turn it into a time of evangelism before king and governor? The best answer to that question is that Luke is showing us that proclamation of the gospel is the church’s best defense. Our behavior is unjustifiable unless Jesus is alive — but if He is, and the New Testament is true, then the rest of it follows from that. We ought to be evangelizing; we ought to be living for God; we ought to be found at the center of riots caused by people who can’t stand the good news that Jesus does indeed live. In short, brothers and sisters, Paul’s defense is simply “Christianity is true.” That is all the church has to say for itself. We don’t claim to do good on the world’s terms; we are not a social relief organization that even

an atheist could endorse. Our activities are only good, only make sense, if Jesus is really alive. We stand or fall on the certainty of His resurrection and reign.

I. Paul's First Goal: Defending Against the Jews' Accusations, v. 2

Paul begins his speech by saying that he is going to defend himself against all the things that the Jews have accused him of. If you remember, of course, the previous chapter said that they brought many weighty charges against him, which Luke doesn't bother to list because, he strongly implies, they're all lies anyway. But before that, in ch. 21, he records that the main charges were that Paul had sinned against the Jewish people, the law, and the temple. Paul, in other words, is going to set the record straight on those points here in this speech.

II. Paul's Points, vv. 4-23

But as we'll see, he has had enough of performing point-by-point refutations of the Jews' charges, particularly since they aren't even present at this event to accuse him. Instead, as he did in ch. 24 before Felix, he shares his life story. Why? Because, once again, he is saying, "Look, you'd never find a less likely candidate to believe this Christian stuff. I am not a credulous individual; I am the most bigoted anti-Christian imaginable." A rabbi who has become a Christian — that is something you don't see every day. It's like finding a Roman Catholic archbishop who converts to Islam. It just doesn't happen, by and large. So, Paul is saying, my very existence as a Christian shows that the Christian message is true and that Jesus really reigns.

A. I Share Israel's Hope in the Resurrection, vv. 4-8

He starts by making his most important point: Israel hopes in the resurrection, and has done so forever. This is a key part of Jewish belief. This is not some theologoumenon that a few fringe types believe in; this is the core of Judaism. All twelve tribes believe in it; all Jews live for it. This is the hope of Israel. It's mainstream! And so, Paul continues, with a passionate rhetorical outburst, "Why would any of you think it incredible that God raises the dead?"

To Paul, the resurrection of the dead is axiomatic. This is Judaism 101. It's like saying that Jews don't eat pork. It just almost goes without saying. In Paul's mind, the whole trial, the whole sitting in jail for two years waiting for Felix to leave, then more time sitting in jail waiting for Festus to get to his case, really boils down to a trial of the resurrection. This is not about whether I was causing riots. It's not about whether I am a renegade Jew. It's about whether I have represented God rightly when I say that He raises the dead. That's what this trial is about.

Now, that is not exactly how Festus described the issues to Agrippa in the previous chapter. There is some overlap, and Festus clearly knew that Paul's claim that Jesus was alive was somehow involved in the riot in which he was caught in Jerusalem two years previously. But to Paul, the entire process was simply resurrection hope on trial. Resurrection hope was the fundamental thing at issue between Paul and his Jewish opponents. He had it, and they did not. And of course, on this fundamental issue, the Romans (the swing voters) stood with the Jews. The Romans did not hope in the resurrection either. Only Paul and his fellow Christians believed in the resurrection, despite it being a clear Jewish doctrine. Paul's lament here, in other words, is not that his people are too Jewish but that they aren't Jewish enough!

B. Jesus Commissioned Me on the Road to Damascus, vv. 9-18

Well then, with that background — that this is really about the resurrection, not anything else — Paul goes on to describe how Jesus commissioned him on the road to Damascus. He omits the references to Ananias the Jew and to his temple vision here, because he is mostly talking to the Romanized Agrippa. He is not trying to prove his Jewishness, but rather simply describing the experience that convinced him that Jesus was actually alive. Having a conversation with a man is a good way to come to the conclusion that that man is living. And that is what Paul did. He spoke to Jesus at length — actually, he listened to Jesus at length. Christ commissioned him to go to his own people and to the Gentiles too, turning them from darkness to light, bringing them out of Satan’s power and introducing them to God and His power. This is what happened to the bigoted persecutor Saul of Tarsus and turned him into an unstoppable, unsilenceable witness to the resurrection of the Son of God.

C. I’ve Preached Jesus’s Resurrection Everywhere, vv. 19-23

In fact, he concludes, I’ve preached Jesus’ resurrection everywhere. He specifically highlights the work he did in the territories adjacent to Caesarea, but also mentions his trips to the Gentiles to make it clear that he was not acting on his own; he was driven by this experience, this “heavenly vision” of the ascended Christ.

So that is Paul’s goal: to defend himself by showing that though he once persecuted the church, he has been building it for decades, ever since he was privileged to see the risen Christ and hear a commission from Him.

III. Paul’s Second Goal: The Conversion of His Audience, vv. 24-29

Well, Paul winds up his speech with a beautiful climax about Christ as the first to rise from the dead.

A. Festus Objects, v. 24

And it is at this point that Festus interrupts him to say, “Paul, you’re insane!” I will just mention here that I was in the midst of a complicated explanation of some doctrine, probably Calvinism, to my decidedly Arminian grandmother one day when she said, “Caleb, Caleb, your great learning is driving you mad!”

I said, “Well, Grandma, considering to whom that was originally said, I’ll take it as a compliment!”

She laughed, of course. But Festus and Paul weren’t laughing. Paul dares to correct the governor, essentially by saying “I wasn’t talking to you. This is obviously a very Jewish speech, and I was addressing it to Agrippa, a man who is part Jewish and learned in all the customs and controversies of the Jews.”

B. Paul Confronts Agrippa with the Claims of Christ, vv. 25-27

And with that, Paul actually turns to the highest-ranking person in the room, King Agrippa, and directly confronts him with a question: “Do you believe the prophets?”

Agrippa can’t say “No” and anger his constituents; he can’t say “Yes” because then Paul is going to press him hard to become a believer.

Notice what Paul is doing. He is not afraid to push for conversions. He doesn't say "I'd like you all to take some time to think and pray about this. I know I've presented you with a lot, and it will take some processing." He doesn't say that a bit. Instead, he presses people with the gospel invitation. I don't generally believe in altar calls, but I must say that this particular sermon in Acts comes very close to being one!

C. Agrippa Declines to Believe, v. 28

Since Paul didn't say it, Agrippa says it for him: I haven't had enough time, Paul. I'm a little persuaded — which is the same as saying "I'm not persuaded." If you tell someone you're a little bit inclined to believe what he says, then you are probably not particularly inclined to it. But anyway, Agrippa simply puts it off. He is not interested in committing at this point.

D. Paul Prays for the Conversion of His Audience, v. 29

Undeterred, Paul prays for the conversion of his audience. He wants everyone who heard his speech to become Christians too. That was his goal all along. He was leveraging his testimony, not to entertain an elite audience, but to persuade them to convert and follow Jesus. Paul wanted them to be like him — sold out for Christ.

IV. Rome's Verdict: Paul Is Totally Innocent, vv. 30-32

Well, Luke tells us that the meeting broke up, but that the consensus among Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice was that Paul was not a threat to anyone and that he should never have been put in prison. Of course, it was easy for Festus to say that at this point, now that Paul is headed for Rome and no longer a political problem for Festus to deal with. If he had had any courage, Festus would have freed Paul on his first day in office, or at the very least at the end of the hearing in the previous chapter. Of course, he didn't do so because he wanted to keep the natives happy and not bring his governorship to an untimely demise.

V. Luke's Message: The Church's Ultimate Defense Is to Proclaim the Gospel

So what is Luke's message to us? That the church's ultimate defense is to proclaim the gospel. We declare our innocence by announcing the resurrection of Jesus and telling people that if they believe in Him, they too will rise from the dead.

The church can't defend itself by jumping on the world's bandwagons. In Palestine at this time, there was a Zealot faction opposed to Rome. The church was not going to gain favor with the Jews by joining them in fanatical opposition to Rome. From this distance, that's obviously a losing proposition. But the church was also not going to get anywhere by becoming bootlickers to Caesar. If the church just became an institution that was all about legitimizing and aggrandizing the Roman state, it would rightly be an object of mockery. The same goes for today. The church is not going to prove its relevance by becoming a crusader against climate change (sorry, Rome). It's not going to attract people by getting involved in politics. It's not going to flourish by becoming a homeless shelter.

Now, it's not wrong to help homeless people, or even to get out the vote. But if the church loses its mission of proclamation and becomes a social club whose purpose is something other than proclaiming the good news about Jesus, we've missed Luke's lesson here. Because the Kingdom is certain, because Jesus really reigns, defend yourself by proclaiming that. Christ

reigns. Praise God, and go tell it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere. We won't get anywhere by hiding our faith; our call is to make it known, as Paul did. Amen.