Chapter 55: All Things to All People

Acts 21:17–36

Christians can often swing from two extremes when they think about making accommodations for the culture. Some reject the possibility of cultural accommodation entirely, opting to withdraw from the broader culture or become antagonistic to that culture. Others eagerly engage in every common, cultural pursuit without much thought. Still others try to accommodate the message of Christianity so much that they end up forfeiting the distinctiveness of Christianity altogether. In Acts 21:17–36, Paul offers a model of godly accommodation, while we also see the harsh reality for which believers must prepare: namely, *the world rejects godly accommodation*.

Godly Accommodation (Acts 21:17–26)

The arrival of Paul in Jerusalem sets in motion a series of events that will lead us all the way to the end of this book. Ultimately, this series of events will also lead to the end of Paul's life in this world. Throughout the rest of this story, then, Luke highlights the theme of Paul as a faithful witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ, no matter where he goes or to whom he speaks.[1] Following in the footsteps of Christ's sufferings, Paul is faithful, but his faithfulness only leads him into greater sufferings, including his ultimate martyrdom for the cause of Christ.[2] We will study the development of this theme through the rest of the book; however, all of this begins here in Jerusalem.

When Paul arrives, "the brothers received us gladly" (v. 17). Note that the word "us" flags that Luke is present for this part of the journey. This is not Paul's first time in Jerusalem (Acts 15), and the brothers rejoiced to be reunited with Paul. The term "brothers" likely refers to all the gathered believers. The next day, then, Paul went in to a private meeting with the church leaders: "On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present" (v. 18).[3] This James is not the Apostle James, the brother of John, whom Herod murdered in Acts 12:2. Instead, this is the elder named James, the brother of the Lord Jesus. This James had made the decisive proposal at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13–21), and now he seems to be the leader of the church in Jerusalem who serves as its spokesman. Although the text does not call him the "president" or "moderator" of the church's Session of elders, this seems to be his role.[4] Luke does not tell us that any apostles were in Jerusalem at this time.

Previously, we had noted what Paul talks about in many of his letters: namely, that on his

[1] Polhill, *Acts*, 439–40.

[2] See Polhill on "the rather striking parallels to Jesus' own passion" in the remainder of this section through Acts 26:32 (Polhill, *Acts*, 444).

[3] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:276.

[4] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 429. Polhill: "the presiding elder" (Polhill, *Acts*, 446.).

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journey to Jerusalem, he would bring a relief offering for the brethren in Judea (Rom. 15:25–27; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9). Yet, we do not read anything about the delivery of this offering. Some have speculated that the offering might not have happened, but Schnabel is probably correct when he writes, "More plausible is the suggestion that when Luke wrote his account, the significance of Paul's arrest and long imprisonment completely overshadowed the collection."[5] Instead, we only read that Paul gave a report about what "God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry," and that the elders in Jerusalem "glorified God" over that great missionary fruit (vv. 19–20a).

Paul's discussion of how the Gentiles had come to faith in Christ provided an opportunity to segue into an area of concern for the Jerusalem leaders. Not uncommonly in the church, the rumor mills in Jerusalem had been working overtime with idle speculation about Paul.[6] The elders lay out their dilemma well:

> "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come." (vv. 20b–22)

While Paul had actively spread the gospel far out into new areas of the world, the believers at Jerusalem had continued bearing witness to Jesus as the Messiah long awaited by the Jewish people. Although the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem largely continued to reject Jesus as the Messiah, the patient, faithful, and bold witness of the church that remained in this area had gradually won the faith of "thousands" of Jews. Yet, within the Jewish cultural context of Jerusalem, these believers had remained "zealous for the law."

The concern was not primarily about what Paul taught among the Gentiles, since the Council held in Jerusalem in Acts 15 had established that Gentiles were not required to observe Jewish food laws or circumcision. The elders restate this conviction in v. 25. Instead, the concern among Jewish believers was whether Paul had taught *Jews* "to forsake Moses" by not circumcising their children or not "walk[ing] according to our customs." These matters were permissible for Jews, so that Paul himself advocated tolerance among weak believers (Rom. 14) and stated that he himself was willing to observe them for specific purposes: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law" (1 Cor. 9:20).[7] Yet, he was also willing to "adapt to the ways of the Gentile majority in the Christian churches" (1 Cor. 9:21).[8]

To address these concerns among the Jewish believers, the elders suggest a plan for Paul to join four men under a vow by purifying himself and paying their expenses at the completion of their vow (Acts 21:23b–24). Bock notes that the nature of the vow is not entirely clear (four options have been proposed for Paul's participation: purity after traveling in Gentile areas; simple participation in the remainder of a vow; the men have contracted uncleanness; Paul's own vow), although the shaving of

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[5] Schnabel, *Acts*, 871.

[6] "…freely rumoured..." (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 430.)

[7] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 878.

[8] Polhill, *Acts*, 448.

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heads suggests a Nazirite vow.[9] Assuming that the men were under a Nazirite vow, the ceremony and expenses to complete the vow "involved cutting their hair and burning it as an offering. In addition a number of costly sacrifices were required—a male and a female lamb, a ram, and cereal and drink offerings (Num 6:14f.)."[10]

The goal of this plan was simple: "Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law" (v. 24b). Paul, for his part, straightaway did exactly what was asked of him (v. 26). On Paul's willingness to accommodate the concerns of the Jewish believers, Bruce writes, "Whether he was wise in doing so may well be doubted. There is no evidence that his action produced any such reassuring effect on the zealots for the law as James and his fellow-elders had hoped; and it certainly brought Paul himself into trouble of the gravest kind."[11] This raises an interesting question. Was Paul wise to undertake this course of action? As we will see in the next section, Bruce is correct that his actions do not protect him, and only bring him into significant danger. Yet, there is more to evaluating the wisdom of this action than whether it "worked." No solution would have satisfied everyone.

Worldly Rejection (Acts 21:27–36)

As Paul was going through the process of purification, he was in the temple (v. 27). There, "the Jews from Asia" began to stir up "the whole crowd" into nearly a riot, "crying out, 'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place'" (vv. 27–28). To bring Gentiles into the temple was a serious problem, since their presence would ceremonially defile it. Bruce writes, "The Roman authorities were so conciliatory of Jewish religious scruples in this regard that they ratified the death sentence for this trespass even when it was passed on Roman citizens."[12]

Nevertheless, this was false, since they mistakenly believed that Paul had taken Trophimus the Ephesian into the temple with him (v. 29). Polhill writes, "On an occasion when he was trying to establish his Jewishness, it was the last thing he would have done! It was an instance of sheer irony. In the temple for his own purification, Paul was accused of having defiled it."[13] This point is significant in understanding this story. Paul is going out of his way to accommodate the concerns of Jews in Jerusalem. Indeed, his purpose for being in the temple was for the sake of taking part in Jewish purification rituals. Nevertheless, those facts are distorted and twisted and used against him violently, as the people stir themselves up and converge upon Paul, seizing and dragging him out of the temple to beat him in the streets with the intent of killing him (vv. 30–32). We will return to this point later.

At this point, Gentiles intervene to spare Paul from the Jews (v. 32). Yet, while the arrival of the tribune stops the crowd from beating Paul, the tribune arrests Paul and binds him with two chains (v. 33). During this time, there is great confusion in the uproar: "Some in the crowd were shouting

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[9] Bock, *Acts*, 647–48.

[10] Polhill, *Acts*, 449.

[11] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 432.

[12] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 433–34. Bruce writes, "Titus, the Roman commander and chief, reminds the defenders of the temple of this concession in a speech attributed to him by Josephus (*Jewish War*, vi.2.4)" (p. 434n42).

[13] Polhill, *Acts*, 453.

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one thing, some another" (v. 34a). Due to this chaos, the soldiers had to take Paul up to the barracks, carrying him to protect him, as the mob shouted, "Away with him!" (vv. 35–36). Polhill notes that the fury of the crowd and even the nearly verbatim words "Away with him!" resemble the crowd in Jerusalem demanding the death and expulsion of Jesus (Luke 23:18).[14] As Paul's Lord had been rejected by the Jews in Jerusalem, so now Paul suffers in a very similar way.

So, were Paul's actions wise? If we judge these events by whether they succeeded in winning the admiration of the unbelieving crowd, then no, these were not wise actions. If, on the other hand, we judge these actions according to their faithfulness as Paul entrusted himself to him who judges justly —just as Christ himself had done (1 Pet. 2:23)—then yes, these actions were wise. The wisdom here does not lead to immediate, temporal success. Nevertheless, Paul models a kind of faithfulness that will lead to his eternal success, patterned after Christ's greatest glory at the cross.

Discussion Questions

1. What have we been expecting in the lead-up to Paul's arrival in Jerusalem (Acts 20:23)? How do the believers in Jerusalem greet Paul (v. 17)? How do the elders at Jerusalem respond to the report Paul gives of the progress of the gospel (vv. 18–20)? How has the gospel progressed in Jerusalem since we last heard much about the church in Acts 8 and 15 (v. 20)? How has the church at Jerusalem navigated the culture of Judaism with the faith of Jesus as the Messiah?

2. What are the elders at Jerusalem worried about (v. 21–22)? Are they right to be concerned with the scruples of the believers who are "zealous for the law?" What have the believers heard about Paul (v. 21)? Was this a fair criticism of Paul? Why or why not? What do the elders suggest that Paul do (vv. 23–24)? What is the goal for Paul's participation in this purification ritual? How are they careful to avoid imposing Jewish law on Gentiles (v. 25)?

3. Was Paul willing to do what the elders suggested to him (v. 26)? Was he faithful in doing so? Was he wise in doing so? How did the wider, unbelieving Jewish crowd react to Paul when they saw him in the temple (vv. 27–30)? Why were the charges against Paul so serious? Were the charges against Paul accurate? How did the people react to these charges? Did they give Paul a fair trial to hear his defense?

4. How do the actions by the mob in Jerusalem against Paul compare to the actions by the mob in Jerusalem against Jesus? Why is there such a close comparison between Paul's sufferings and Jesus' sufferings? How did Jesus bear faithful witness in front of those demanding his death? How does Paul bear faithful witness to Christ in the midst of his own sufferings? What do you learn about accommodating to the culture faithfully without capitulating?

[14] Polhill, *Acts*, 444. Luke 23:18 is "Away with this one!" (Αἶρε τοῦτον; *Aire touton*), whereas Acts 21:36 is "Away with him!" (Αἶρε αὐτόν; *Aire auton*).

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