

Acts 21:17-26**“Paul the Doormat”****September 11, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Chapter 20 and the first part of chapter 21 told the story of Paul’s trip from Greece to Jerusalem, partly by land, mostly by sea. Now he has arrived. Luke is about to tell us what happened when he and his Gentile converts, the representatives of his Gentile churches, met with the Jerusalem church’s leadership and presented to them the gift of that large sum of money that had been collected from those churches over several years for the sake of the poor believers in the mother church in Jerusalem.

Text Comment

- v.17 Luke was there and he recollects how happy the Jewish believers were to meet these Gentile Christians. One wonders if there were some measure of relief; if there had been some fear on the part of these Gentile men that they wouldn’t be welcome. They knew only too well the history of animosity between Jew and Gentile in the Greco-Roman world. Further, remember the historical context. Not many years would pass before the Jewish rebellion would break out into armed conflict. Jewish/Roman tensions were at a high pitch, higher than they had ever been, and bringing a group of Gentiles into the capital at such a “xenophobic moment” was provocative, even dangerous, as events would prove. [Witherington in Peterson, 584]
- v.18 This James, remember, is James the Just, the brother of the Lord and author of the New Testament letter that bears his name. He is not James the apostle, the brother of John, the James of Peter, James, and John in the Gospels. That James was executed some years before by Herod Agrippa, an account of which execution we were given in Acts 12. Paul and James had met before on several occasions. What made this meeting so significant is that by this time it was clear that the two men represented two distinct Christian communities, James the Jews – to whom he addressed his letter if you remember – and Paul the Gentiles, to whom, to one degree or another, all of Paul’s letters were addressed. [cf. Stott, 339]

The fact that the church in Jerusalem numbered many thousands, as we will read in v. 20, means that the number of elders would have been considerable. This was not a conversation in someone’s living room.

- v.21 Note first that the Jewish believers glorified God for what they had heard he was doing among the Gentiles. Presumably, though Luke does not mention the fact until chapter 24, it was at this meeting that the offering from the Gentile churches was presented to the Jewish Christian leaders.

Second, the issue they raised, accordingly, was *not* what Gentile Christians were being taught to do or what they had the freedom to do. So far as we can tell, the Jewish Christians had by this time come to terms with the fact that Gentiles would not be

required to become Jews in order to be Christians. The question was whether *Jewish* Christians, especially the large number of them living in the diaspora, that is, outside of the Holy Land, were being encouraged to forsake their Jewish religious culture. James' reference to "our customs," whatever else it meant, would certainly include circumcision, observing the distinction between clean and unclean foods and keeping the Saturday Sabbath, whether or not in addition to Sunday. But it clearly did not refer to what we are accustomed to call the *moral law*. Everyone was agreed that any Christian was required to live a holy life in obedience to God's commandments. But to say that these Jewish believers were "zealous for the law" suggests that they were influenced by the Pharisaic position or attitude. They were touchy about any suggestion that Christian Jews need not honor their Jewish culture or lifestyle. [Peterson, 585]

- v.21 That somewhat curious remark suggests that there was a recognizable party of Jewish Christians suspicious of Paul's ministry, that this group was already agitated by these rumors, and, also, that this group was not represented at this first meeting between Paul, his entourage, James and the elders. We have parties in our own church, the Presbyterian Church in America. We speak naturally of those on the right and on the left of our denomination, as do people in every other denomination, however different "right" and "left" may be from church to church. Well, they had that sort of divided opinion even in the church that was the mother of all Christian churches. There was – shall we say it? – a "hard right" party in the Jerusalem church. And it was itching for a fight to ensure that the Jewish Christian church remain thoroughly Jewish.
- v.24 The vow in question appears to have been the Nazirite vow as the shaving of the head indicates. Paul would participate with these brothers in the final rites that completed the vow, which would probably have involved making a sacrifice in the temple and paying for the sacrifices to be made by the others. There was no fee to make a sacrifice, but sacrificial animals had to be purchased. There are some questions that remain; it is not possible to be certain precisely what was done and when, but these questions do not touch the fact that Paul did participate with these brothers in the sacrificial ritual of the temple. Indeed, he says in 24:17 that this was his purpose in going to Jerusalem. He went there to bring alms and to present offerings. Indeed, it is almost certain that when his own Nazirite vow had run its course (as we read in 18:18), he had offered a sacrifice for himself as required by that vow at the end of his second missionary journey, some three years before. In sum, what Paul would demonstrate in this way was that he was himself still a practicing Jew.
- v.25 The advice communicated to the Gentile churches was the advice decided some years beforehand by the Jerusalem synod, an account of which we have in Acts 15. In other words, in regard to Gentile believers, the issue had been settled and the Jewish believers were happy to continue to follow the counsel of that synod. All they asked of Gentile believers was consideration of the scruples of Jewish believers in their midst.
- v.26 The point was that Paul's action would disabuse anyone of the idea that the freedom of the Gentiles from Jewish religious obligations had led Paul to undermine the commitment of Jewish Christians to those obligations.

If you still entertain a view of salvation history and of the relationship between the Mosaic epoch and that epoch inaugurated by Christ and his apostles that cannot easily and happily accommodate the unassailable fact that Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, saw no difficulty in offering blood sacrifice in the temple now some thirty years after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (precise dating is difficult but it is generally acknowledged that we are now in the late 50s A.D. [Peterson, 583]), it is time to rethink your view. Many evangelicals, if asked, would say that Paul would never have done such a thing – it would have been inappropriate after the cross and the resurrection – but, in fact, he did. The Jewish sacrifices, rightly viewed, were evangelical rites and could be used by Jewish Christians after the resurrection as before. God saw to the end of that system of worship by destroying the temple, not by teaching that its worship was somehow defective or inappropriate or obsolete.

Now, the material point with which we must begin in our consideration of this history *is that the rumors circulating about Paul's teaching and practice were untrue*. Like so many rumors then as now, the stories spread from mouth to mouth took on a life of their own, were shaped by the prejudices of those who spread them, and had little or no connection with any actual knowledge of Paul's life or ministry. I have had some experience of this in my own life. People have told me that other people are saying that I teach such and such. Others have been alarmed by the report. They take it seriously because, after all, it's on *Facebook*. And my response was to ask how in the world they got such an idea. To what sermon or statement of mine did they refer? How did they prove the accusation? Not only did I never teach such a thing, I never imagined such a thing! And, of course, there is, in the rumor nothing like evidence or proof or even anecdote, just the accusation itself. How lifelike this situation in long ago Jerusalem! How characteristic of human life and, alas, of life in the church as well.

The rumors that were circulating among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, rumors that certain ones among them were only too happy to believe and to spread – no need to check the facts! – were contradicted both by Paul's characteristic behavior and his teaching. So far as we know, so far as the evidence goes, we have no reason to believe that Paul behaved, *as a Jew*, while ministering in the diaspora among Gentiles, in any way that was contrary to Jewish custom. True enough, he didn't entertain or act on the prejudices that animated many Jews' view of Gentiles and behavior toward Gentiles. But none of that prejudice was taught in the Old Testament and, in any case, any *Christian Jew* knew only too well that the days of looking down on Gentiles were over. They were streaming into the church in great numbers by the grace and power of God and any doubts that remained about Jews and Gentiles living as brethren in the church had long since been put to rest. True enough, there were some outliers, Jewish Christians who still wanted Gentile believers to conform to Jewish customs, but it is clear here in Luke's account that the Jerusalem church knew better than that and it seems clear in the historical record that over time that small party fizzled and disappeared in the church.

The facts are these. Paul *did not* encourage Jewish converts to abandon their Jewish way of life, except in those ways demanded by loyalty to Jesus Christ. He doesn't make any such demands in his letters. He was happy for Jewish and Gentile believers to live differently in certain respects so long as they honored the convictions that they both shared as Christians. Indeed, Paul

made a principle of this in his teaching. If it were not a matter of *Christian* obedience, Jewish and Gentile believers were to honor one another's freedom to express their faith as they wished. If you remember, Paul had Timothy circumcised, though only his mother was Jewish, precisely as a demonstration of this principle of mutual toleration and respect. He was as much as saying – as he *did* say on many occasions – to both groups, bend where you can, do what you can to promote unity and to lessen tension. We need not only to believe that we are one in the Lord, but to live in that unity.

We cannot tell to what extent Paul actually abided by Jewish customs since he was usually in the presence of Gentiles, eating in their homes and so on. But he clearly had not taught Jewish believers to forsake them and, when possible and appropriate, he participated himself. He was not, in other words, forsaking his usual practice, or acting the hypocrite, when he took his Nazirite vow, mentioned in Acts 18:18, or when on that occasion or this he offered sacrifices in the temple. In fact, later he will say that he had cleansed himself from ceremonial impurity before he entered the temple. In other words, he was careful to observe the Jewish customs; after all, he was himself a Jew and proud to be one.

On the other hand, it is not difficult to understand where the rumors might have come from. Paul clearly taught that these questions touched on matters neither necessary for salvation nor binding on the conscience. In other words, by giving freedom to Gentile Christians to live differently than Jewish Christians and to stress their freedom to do so as Paul had done – indeed Paul was a champion of Gentile freedom from Jewish customs – he would have seemed in some passionately Jewish Christian minds to be diminishing the importance if not belittling such customs so precious to Jews. [cf. Peterson, 585-586] Indeed, to be frank, it is not clear from the material we have in the New Testament - from Acts or from Paul's letters - that Paul would have said that Jewish Christians were obliged or required to continue to observe the Sabbath on Saturday or required to observe the distinction between clean and unclean foods. When the Lord told Peter to take and eat that first ham sandwich, he was certainly teaching his apostle that Gentiles didn't have to become Jews to become Christians, but he did tell Peter, a Jew, to take and eat food that had long been forbidden to Jews.

Such distinctions between what is appropriate, what is perfectly acceptable, and what is absolutely required have often been the source of conflict between people and between Christians. The long, bitter, and painful argument over teetotalism in the American evangelical church is a perfect example. One may admit that a Christian is theoretically free to drink alcohol, but still may believe and very strongly that he ought not to do so. Another believes that one is free to abstain from alcohol but looks down on the abstainer as a weaker brother. Paul's use of that terminology, of the weaker and stronger brother – so often referred to in modern debates about this and other things – invited just those sorts of disagreements and resentments. And, no doubt, they fueled the rumors about his teaching and practice that were circulating in Jerusalem in an atmosphere already made tense by Jewish patriotic fervor and the Jews' sense of resentment over their oppression by Gentile masters.

But this fact – that the rumors were untrue – is immensely important for understanding and appreciating what Paul then did. When it came to the gospel itself, the truth of the Word of God, the events of the life and work of Jesus Christ, the summons to faith and repentance, Paul was

unbending, unmovable, and inflexible. But, as he himself tells us in 1 Corinthians 9, he was everyone's doormat when it came to accommodating the interests and concerns of others so that he might advance the gospel's cause in their hearts.

So consider what it was that Paul did. People told him that others were saying that he was a disloyal Jew, that he was undermining Jewish identity, that he was, in fact, an enemy of the Jewish Christian cause. How might he have responded to those accusations? Well, alas, I know only too well how *I* might have responded.

"I have done no such thing. Those people are telling lies about me." Or he might have demanded that they present their evidence to substantiate those claims. "I'm not leaving here until they either put up or shut up." He might very well have said – what a great many in the ages since have said in similar situations – "I'm not going to dignify these rumors by taking steps to disprove them. That would be the same thing as admitting that there were grounds to believe those rumors in the first place. To do so would make it seem that I was changing my practice to mollify my critics. I would be happy to have gone into the temple and offered sacrifice, but if I do it now it will appear to these people that I am playing the hypocrite, offering worship in the temple simply to calm their ruffled feathers."

Would we have been surprised if we had read here in chapter 21 that Paul asked for, or even demanded an audience with his accusers? After all, didn't the Law of Moses require that any accusation be proved by two or three witnesses? Paul knew very well they couldn't produce even one witness because there was nothing for anyone to have witnessed! After all, James knew that much. He knew the rumors were untrue.

But Paul's response was entirely different. He did cheerfully and readily what we so often resent doing, proving to people who mistrust us that we are not guilty of the things we have been accused of. You know and I know, having lived long enough in this world, and Paul certainly knew that some people were going to attach the wrong significance to what he was about to do. Some would find it an act of weakness, giving in to the rumor-mongers. I can guarantee you that there were even some Jewish Christians who thought exactly that – Paul shouldn't do this. It was cow-towing to the wrong crowd. Others would find it an act of hypocrisy, since they would remain unpersuaded that he was free of the taint of the charge of disloyalty to Judaism. And still others would make far too much of his temple worship, using Paul's own example to advance their errors. In a situation as highly charged as Jerusalem in the late 50s A.D. it was inevitable that people would draw their own conclusions from what a man as prominent as Paul would do or would not do.

But this is what James and the Jerusalem elders thought would be the wisest course and would be most effective in resolving tension in the church, so Paul happily complied. He willingly submitted himself to their instruction. This is Paul, a man who on other occasions had no hesitation in asserting his full rights as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, his own freedom to chart his course. But here he is taking the advice of the Jerusalem elders to help assuage the tension caused by people who were drinking in lies being told about him.

Sometimes Paul would not bend, but here he is the proverbial pretzel. He was willing to do anything gospel principles allowed, even when by doing so, he could virtually guarantee that some people were going to misunderstand what he did and that he would be giving unwitting comfort to some others who would point to his actions as proof of their own errors. *In this too, he was a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.* The Lord associated intimately with the wrong sort of people - the outcasts, the people the Jews regarded as unclean - and suffered the consequences in the opinion of many. On the other hand, he would allow himself to be the honored guest at feasts thrown by the great and powerful in the land and got himself, in that way, a reputation as a glutton and a drunk. He couldn't win, but Jesus was, as Paul would later say he was, "all things to all men" that he might win some. He knew he wouldn't win them all, but he was determined to win as many as he could. He did his best to overcome the prejudice of others, even if he knew full well his efforts would not always succeed and, even, would be misunderstood. That is the thankless fortune of the peacemaker.

Think of John Duncan, 19th century Scottish Presbyterianism's famous "Rabbi" Duncan. He was first a missionary to Jews in Hungary. In other words, he was a Gentile seeking to reach Jews, the exact reverse of Paul's situation. They said of him what Paul said of himself, that "unto the Jews he became as a Jew that he might gain the Jews." In Budapest he so adapted himself to Jewish custom that his opponents accused him of being a "very cunning missionary," that is, someone who was seeking to trick Jews into falling under his influence by acting like he was one of them. But friendly Jews said of him that no Gentile had ever so successfully entered into their thoughts and feelings. [Moody Stuart, *Life of John Duncan*, 110-111]

Or think of Hudson Taylor growing his pigtail as a missionary in China. Very like Paul's strategy as a Jew evangelizing Gentiles, he did his best to overcome not only the vast cultural divide that separated westerners from the Chinese but a deep-seated and often unrecognized prejudice on the part of westerners toward the Chinese. Jew and Gentile all over again. Criticism came from all sides. There were Chinese who felt it condescending, or manipulative. And there were plenty of Englishmen in China, including English missionaries, who were deeply offended that an Englishman so willingly turned his back on English culture, a culture they felt was superior to that of the Chinese. They saw him, as some of the Jewish believers saw Paul, as a turncoat. The sad and ironic fact was that some of the most fanatical opposition to Taylor's decision to adopt Chinese dress came from other Christian missionaries who were equally devoted to the cause of the gospel in China. And, of course, they wrote home to tell others of their disappointment in Hudson Taylor and the rumor-mill began to churn. I can almost guarantee that there were among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were suspicious of, if not hostile to the apostle Paul, some otherwise godly men and women, people we would admire for their Christian faith and life. But they were Jews and that mattered a great deal to them! Just as being English mattered a great deal to many Chinese missionaries!

But, as Paul before him, through it all Taylor kept his eye on the main chance: getting Chinese into the kingdom of God and unifying all Christians into a single brotherhood of love.

We have said before that we have history, theology, liturgy, ethics, and wisdom – all the major areas of biblical teaching – we have it all in the book of Acts. And we have seen that Paul is in Acts not only the evangelist, the apologist, the theologian, and the church planter, but *the*

representative Christian. We are to be like Paul in his generous spirit, his willingness to forget himself for the sake of others, his readiness to make sacrifices for the sake of larger gospel interests, to overlook slights and offenses, and his taking steps to make it easier for other believers to think and do the right things. Here too Paul set us an example that we might follow in his steps.

Like it or not controversy has dogged the gospel and the church of God from the very beginning. There have always been things Christians have found to argue about, and, alas often furiously. Many of those things have arisen from differences of family culture or national culture or racial culture or political culture. Surely it is revealing that even under the leadership of James the Just, the brother of the Lord, a man of tremendous reputation and spiritual authority, the Jerusalem church still had its parties and its divided opinions. But there have also always been men, like Paul, or John Duncan, or Hudson Taylor who knew better than to allow themselves to be diverted by argument or rumor from the great calling of Christians to love one another and reach the lost. I want to be like them, don't you? I want to have their reputation, not the reputation of those who spread rumors, who report suspicions about others behind their backs.

I remember being arrested by a remark of Alexander Whyte, a remark that I have never forgot since first reading it years ago. "If we cannot [manage controversy] with clean and all-men-loving hearts, let us leave all debate and contention to stronger and better men than we are." Wise words! Would that more people heeded them. [*Bunyan Characters*, vol. I, 141-142] And what a perfect goal to strive for, to be a Christian as Paul was or as Augustine was, of whom it was said that he was *fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*, that is, strong in conviction but gentle and humble in the way he stood for those convictions.

This isn't a goal just for the management of contention in the church, this is a principle of life, a goal for the management of our marriage, our family, our friendships, our relations at work, for everything: *fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*. Keep in your mind's eye: Paul the willing doormat; Paul the pretzel!