

A CHURCH CONFERENCE

Acts 21:17-26

Paul was returning from his third missionary journey. He had hoped to be in Jerusalem by the time of the annual feast of the Jews. His first act upon arriving was to have a meeting with the officials of the church and report his struggles and successes to them. Much prejudice had sprung up since he had been away, and he found them with closed minds. It became a dynamic meeting.

I. A Hearty Reception.

"The brethren received us gladly." Verse 17. They claimed to be delighted to see him, yet they bitterly criticized him. It reminds us of one on whom a neighbor calls. The hostess is very polite and courteous. When a guest leaves the hostess is very profuse in compliments and expressions of joy and begs the guest not to go so soon and please come back. But the guest has no sooner departed than the hostess turns around with a sneer, and says, "I thought she never would leave. That woman bores me nearly to death." It also reminds one of some people who tell the pastor how much they enjoyed the sermon when they were not the least interested or were critical.

They virtually said, "You are a great fellow, but you will do to watch." "We love you, but we would like to see you in jail." "You have been very successful, but you are a heretic." These seem to be some of the compliments they paid him.

II. A Heartening Report.

"He declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry." Verse 19. He gave a detailed account of what God had wrought and not what he had done.

He magnified his victories and said nothing of his hardships. Some people hunt for ugly things to report, but not Paul. Some take delight in reporting their opposition, but Paul forgot his in the joy of his victories.

He brought some of his converts with him. He also brought offerings from some of his Gentile converts to help the oppressed Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. The church council seemed willing to receive the offerings but not willing to receive his Gentile converts.

III. A Happy Response.

"And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord." Verse 20a. His report made them praise the Lord. This is a notable compliment to Paul. It is a pity when one tries to take all of the credit away from the Lord. Reports of our work should give the praise to God and not seek praise for ourselves.

Testimonies of God's witnesses should be true to the facts. It is not necessary to magnify reports beyond the realm of truth.

IV. A Harmful Rumor.

Verses 20b-26. During the months of Paul's absence from Jerusalem, false rumors about him and his message had spread widely. Upon his return, Paul had expected to meet bitter opposition and to suffer much persecution, for he had been warned many times of these things, but little did he expect to find them within the circle of the church

at Jerusalem. His brethren in the church there had sent him out and should have rejoiced most in his victories, but they became like the so-called friends of Job. This kind of criticism cuts more deeply than that from open foes.

Paul's critics were actuated by false reports, which they helped to peddle. The fact that he had been preaching to the Gentiles, had been receiving their converts, and had broken down Jewish traditions caused him to be regarded by the Christian Jews as a false teacher and a compromiser of the truth. News of Paul's work among the Gentiles had so inflamed these Christian Jews that they became suspicious of him and his work. They were willing to preach the gospel to all men, but they were unwilling to accept Gentile converts. They were Christian in heart but Jews in head. They required Paul to square himself with their traditions, but they were not willing to square their traditions with the will of God. This is a current weakness among the people of every generation. Many try to make the Bible fit their conduct rather than to square their conduct to fit the Bible.

It is interesting to notice their course of action. Their approach was mild, for they called him "brother." But, their proposal was a virtual command---"Do therefore this that we say to thee." Imagine the leaders in the church telling the mighty Apostle what he must do!

A PREACHER IN TROUBLE

Acts 21:27-40

This chapter presents radical and extreme conditions. The first part of it pictures Paul in the hands of friends who were willing to die for him. The last part of the chapter pictures him in the hands of enemies who were willing to kill him. There is love and hate in sharp contrast. There is confidence and suspicion facing each other. The difference between them is largely a lack of understanding.

I. How Differences Arise.

1. By misunderstanding.

First, they were confused about who Paul was. Verse 38. They thought that he was an Egyptian who was the leader of a murderous band and therefore a dangerous man. Then they were confused about what he taught. Verse 22. They thought he was a free-lance, teaching perverse doctrines and, therefore, was a heretic who needed to be silenced. They were also confused about what Paul was doing. Verse 30. They thought he had come to wreck and despoil the people, the temple and their religion, and, therefore, needed to be imprisoned and punished.

2. By false reports.

They had heard many wild reports about Paul and his work among the Gentiles. As these reports spread they grew and they fired the Jews with hate and prejudice. If they had known only the facts, conditions would have been different.

3. By prejudice.

The Jews were naturally a prejudiced people. They tried to get a monopoly on God, on religion, and on heaven. Whoever shared these with them was regarded as their enemy. There is nothing so poisonous as religious prejudice.

4. By half truths.

The bearers of bad news usually base their reports on half truths. There is usually enough fact to make the fallacy look real. Such half truths are sometimes worse than whole lies.

II. How Differences May Be Amended.

1. By each having a right spirit.
There can be no adjustment of differences until those involved want to know the facts, and until each one wants to do right and be right. So long as there is a desire to have one's way at any cost, there can be no adjustment of differences.
2. By each being willing to make concessions.
These do not require the surrender of principles, but of policies. They do not involve essential things but nonessentials. Most differences have arisen from nonessential things.
3. By each understanding the other.
If these critics of Paul had only known Paul better, if they had had a fuller knowledge of his spirit, his purposes, and his loyalty, there would have been no differences between them.
4. By each fulfilling his pledges.
A group of Jews made a covenant with Paul, but they failed to keep their pledge, at least their fellows violated it for them. Paul made a concession in having his head shaved, and in performing certain ritualistic ceremonies which he had preached were useless and worthless. Yet he agreed to do them for the sake of peace since no principles were involved. After he had made this concession, they still disbelieved him. They caused his arrest and went about to kill him. There was a lack of consistency. There can be no peace until there is consistency.

Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem had led him into the net of Roman law. Things looked bad for him. Everything was against him except God and his conscience.

Paul was a man with a prison record. Many times he had been imprisoned; however, his record was not one of shame but one of honor. There is no shame when an innocent man is imprisoned or when he is incarcerated for the sake of honor and his convictions. Paul turned the prisons of Asia Minor into sanctuaries. For him they became the vestibule of heaven.

Paul often boasted of his citizenship. Three things contributed to it--his Jewish religion, his Roman allegiance and his Greek culture. He was finally killed by the law he defended, and sacrificed for his devotion to his religious convictions, but he went to his death calmly as a Christian should.

Paul showed how a preacher should behave when he is under fire. He refused to lose self-possession or to be discourteous to his oppressors. He never lost sight of his mission in the world. When given an opportunity to speak, he never used the time defending himself, criticizing his enemies, nor attacking constituted authority nor pleading for mercy. He used the time in exalting Christ.