

“The Challenge of Christian Unity”

Acts 21:17-22:30

Last week we saw in 21:1-17 that Christians were in disagreement over whether Paul should go to Jerusalem. They all agreed that the Spirit indicated Paul would suffer once he arrived. Many believers (even Luke) did not want Paul to go because they didn't want to see their friend suffer; let alone die. Yet Paul was adamant that suffering not deter him from going with the gospel to Jerusalem.

And bring the gift of money for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul knew that even though the gospel was reaching many Gentiles, Gentile inclusion in the body of Christ was still a bitter pill for Jewish believers to swallow.

Paul believed he was the one that could unify Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. But unity is a challenge even for people who claim to have faith in Jesus. We can differ in theology, in practice and even in traditions. And throw in cultural differences, language differences and even personalities – it's a wonder any of us get along!! But we do and we will if we put aside self and put on Christ. Something that was missing here in Jerusalem when Paul returned from his church planting expeditions. So while we're going to see why unity amongst believers is very challenging it also doesn't mean it's impossible, if we're willing to humble ourselves as Paul did for the sake of a powerful witness to a lost world. Because Paul's concern for unity should be ours:

We Must Always Be Willing to Work Towards Unity Among Believers (21:17-26)

Paul arrives in Jerusalem:

¹⁷ When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. ¹⁸ The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

²⁰ When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. ²¹ They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. ²² What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, ²³ so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. ²⁴ Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. ²⁵ As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.”

²⁶ The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

The report that Gentiles are coming to Christ all over the Roman Empire results with praise to God! The Jewish leaders of the church share Paul's desire for unity. We work towards unity because

That glorifies God (vv.17-20a)

The Triune partnership of the Father, Son and Spirit model for us eternal unity of love and service towards one other. So when we strive for unity we model the tri-unity of God here on earth.

The leaders glorified God but "You see brother ..."

That Greek word that translates 'You see' indicates Paul, there's something you need to understand. To know up close. These Jerusalem believers; they are still zealous for the Law, for the holydays (it was Pentecost remember?) and they have not come to grips yet with Gentile acceptance. And, these have been told that Paul's teaching was Anti-Jewish, anti-temple and anti-Law – all lies of course. So the leaders suggest to Paul he obey the Law by keeping a 1 week vow of cleansing. Not unusual for Jews travelling abroad who return to Jerusalem and the temple to observe a cleansing ritual that required a priest to examine you before you could worship in the temple proper. It was a mixture of tradition and biblical practice but it didn't contradict anything in Scripture. Paul would have made a sacrifice but it would have been a thank offering not a sin offering. Not all sacrifices were for sin.

So Paul was willing to demonstrate to the Jewish believers that he was not anti-law or anti Jewish. In 1 Cor. 9:19 Paul wrote

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some

Work towards unity

Without compromising the gospel (vv.20b-26)

So Paul agreed to this and was willing to show these Jerusalem believers that what they were hearing about him were lies and misinformation. The week is almost up when in v.27 we read,

²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place." ²⁹ (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.)

Jews from the province of Asia; not believers but those who ran Paul out of Derbe, Lystra and Iconium and made life difficult for him. Why were they there? Some think they may have followed Paul but more likely they just happened to be there because it was Pentecost and they were observant Jews. What results?

³⁰ The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. ³¹ While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he

ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. ³⁵ When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. ³⁶ The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!"

Pandemonium breaks out. They try to kill Paul! What happened? Why didn't believers come together and defend Paul? Why does Christian unity fail?

Spiritual Immaturity and Misinformation **Hinder[or Prevent] Unity** **(21:27-22:21)**

The believers in Jerusalem showed their immaturity in their failure to accept Gentile believers. The Jerusalem council, held not many years earlier in Acts 15 highlighted the standards Gentile believers must adhere to so as not to offend Jewish believers. Why hadn't these Jewish brothers defended Paul? Because they never accepted the biblical standards that were given. And had they really studied the Old Testament they would have come across all kinds of verses about God loving the nations. In Isaiah 49:5-6 we read that the Messiah/Jesus

And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— ⁶ he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

And the Abrahamic covenant in Gen. 12:2-3 God promised that

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

So spiritual immaturity based on failure to grow in and apply God's Word is one of the biggest reasons Christian unity doesn't happen. And, add to that misinformation. These Paul haters from Asia accused Paul of all kinds of things. Were they true? None of them were true. When someone shares something we're unsure of what should we do?

Discern whether the information is true (21:27-29)

Is there any attempt to ask around whether these accusations were true? No. Immediately the whole city was aroused and people came running from all directions. They seized Paul and were about to kill him! The Jews were so paranoid about Gentile uncleanness that they actually had signs in the temple area that said if Gentiles left their courtyard and entered the Jewish courtyard which was close to the temple, then they would be killed. And the Romans allowed that.

However, the Romans also had a guard house situated on the roof of the temple called the Antonia Fortress so the Romans could keep an eye on the Jews who, it seemed, needed a lot of watching. The Roman soldiers step in and grab Paul and actually had to carry him to safety (v.35). The crowd chanted 'Away with him!' about Paul which was eerily similar to a different Jerusalem crowd that chanted to Pilate regarding Jesus about 25 years earlier on His way to be crucified (John 19:15).

A few people make a false statement about Paul and nobody appears to show spiritual discernment and ask whether this claim is true. Obviously they also failed to

Listen before Reacting (21:30-40)

Some things never change. Someone makes a statement about another person – whether its in-person or online – and people just react (often overreact) before listening to whether there is any truth to the statement. Listening gives us the time to discern. When we react first its because we haven't listened properly and have a knee jerk reaction to a claim, whether its true or not.

The Roman soldier arrest Paul first and then ask him who he is and what he's done. Again, react first, listen later, maybe. Thankfully the commander who arrested Paul does listen to Paul who asks if he can address the crowd and make a defense. Yet again notice the false assumption the commander makes about Paul,

Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?"

Misinformation wins the day. Arguing, fighting and almost murder! Yet, Paul is given an opportunity to defend himself, thanks to the Romans (not the Jews) in Ch. 22. As Paul is still trying to bring unity to a divisive situation he

Speaks bridge-building words that make Christ the Focus (22:1-21)

Paul gives a defense of his ministry by giving his testimony, making sure he very clearly shows that God was directing his life. He's trying to show his Jewish audience how Jewish he is. So listen for this:

Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."

² When they heard him speak to them in **Aramaic**, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'

⁸ " 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. " 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ " 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked.

" 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.' ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

¹⁷ "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

¹⁹ “ ‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’ ²¹ “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ”

In spite of how clearly he showed he was fully Jewish and saved by faith in Jesus, all they heard was ‘Gentile’. Which meant they didn’t really listen at all. They only heard what they wanted to hear and they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!” ²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,

Again, pandemonium breaks out. This is really sad because it all started with people who claimed to believe in Jesus as Messiah. Which we don’t need reminding but sadly,

Divisiveness Harms our Witness **(22:22-30)**

Now we read:

²⁴ the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. ²⁵ As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?”

²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. “What are you going to do?” he asked. “This man is a Roman citizen.” ²⁷ The commander went to Paul and asked, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?”

“Yes, I am,” he answered. ²⁸ Then the commander said, “I had to pay a big price for my citizenship.”

“But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied.

²⁹ Those who were about to question him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

³⁰ The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them

Paul is taken away by the Romans and they are going to flog him and then question him as to why the people are shouting at him. They presume he’s guilty and they are going to whip him into confessing his crime. And this is another broad belief many non-Christians have towards Jesus’ followers based on misinformation and ignorance:

They assume we only cause trouble (21:31-37; 22:23-25)

When they first arrested him they said *Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?*

And now they are going to flog him before they question him. The Romans knew from experience that religious Jews were always stirring up trouble because of their religion. And they just lumped Paul in with them. As many people do. Religion is the cause of the world’s problems. Christians are always fighting amongst themselves and stand in our way. Ignorance and misinformation lead people to these conclusions. They only hear what they want to hear.

And something else that is sad but true:

Sometimes unbelievers are wiser than us (22:26-30)

Paul mentions he's a Roman citizen. This stops the flogging (if it had started). Now the Romans listen and by their law they can't flog a citizen. So at least they listen and release him and order the Sanhedrin to meet and hear Paul out. In other words they said, we're going to do this right and let this man have a fair trial. Unfortunately the Romans are more willing to listen than the Jews; many of them not believers but it was started by those who claimed to believe Jesus was the Messiah.

The apostle Peter commands us in 2 Pet. 3:18 to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Having knowledge is not a sign of spiritual maturity. It's necessary for maturity but it must be combined with grace and patience and love to others. Jesus had all the knowledge of the world. He was full of grace and truth. Even when He expressed anger and disappointment it was always measured and controlled and still allowed for grace.

Last week we spent a little bit of time in Prov. 3:5-6 and last Wednesday we were fleshing this out some more in Prov. 3:1-18. There we are commanded to seek wisdom; to desire it more than any earthly valuable commodity.

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, ² for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity [shalom]. ³ Let love [God's grace] and faithfulness [God's truth] never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.

The word shalom means everything in your life is well. You at peace with God, family, friends and you have no real needs. Keeping God's knowledge [commands] is wisdom. Applying the Word, listening to people, showing kindness and extending grace produces a good witness with man and favour with God. Unity means shalom. This is the ultimate goal that the Christian life should result in; harmony with God and others.

We see here how divisiveness (among Jesus followers) resulted almost in hatred and anger. We want nothing to do with ... This happened because people weren't growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. But when we wear God's truth around our necks (live it out where people see it) we will show grace and love and God's name and ours will be a pleasure to hear. *Father, forgive us when we disagree or malign one another with our words. James 3:10 says 'Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.'* Lord, I am not aware of any kind of serious divisiveness here for which I praise you. This makes preaching these passages easier. However, if we're honest we could all ask forgiveness this morning for things we've said or even thought and maybe even have quietly refrained from talking to someone probably because of a misunderstanding or misinformation.

Lord, when we studied Prov. 3 the other night we were blown away by 3:18 where you said that wisdom's ways are ... pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.

The tree of life only appears at the beginning of the Bible when Adam and Eve and you were in perfect sinless, shalom and at the end of the Bible in the New Jerusalem where again we will be in perfect, sinless shalom. However, Prov. 3:18 indicates that when we pursue wisdom and live in

shalom with one another we experience a glimpse of this tree of life like now. May we desire that and pursue it all our days until we finally arrive and experience that forever. Amen

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net