

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS ABOUT CIVIL GOVERNMENT (#2):
PAUL, CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS, AND THE GOSPEL

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Our society has become obsessed with individual rights. Our nation began with a concern for individual rights. The initial move toward independence was accompanied with a cry for political rights. "No taxation without representation" was the demand of early colonists. The Declaration of Independence contained this famous line: **"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."** The Bill of Rights with the first ten amendments to the Constitution specified the nature of these specific rights.

Those rights were finally applied to African Americans in the 1860s. They were more fully enforced with the adoption of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. Women were finally recognized as deserving of voting privileges in the early 1900s.

Then in the 1960s the concern for individual rights began to move into new and uncharted waters. The sexual revolution began a long march toward a demand for sexual rights, including gay rights. In recent years this has extended to the recognition of gay marriage. In 1973 the Supreme Court discovered a new right in the Constitution not previously noticed. The justices discovered a right to privacy, which became a basis for the decision to outlaw prohibitions against abortion. Now we are moving toward transgender rights, which tend to deny biological reality.

In the area of civil law, demand for individual rights has moved in a direction which would be unimaginable to the Founding Fathers. In Ohio parents a few years ago sued the coaches of a high school baseball team for giving their son too much bench time. In April of 2016 Stacy Pincus filed a class action lawsuit against Starbucks for putting too much ice in their cold drinks. In Michigan Richard Overton filed a lawsuit against Anheuser-Busch because drinking more beer did not bring beautiful women to him as was promised in TV ads. Such is the preoccupation with individual rights in our society.

Our subject is "A Biblical View of Civil Government." We are trying to determine what good government looks like, and how we should support it, and how we should pray and vote. Part of our interest as Christians is knowing when and how we should object to bad government and bad rulers. When should we as citizens claim our rights, especially living in a representative democracy?

Two weeks ago we began a look at the Book of Acts to see how the apostles dealt with situations where they were told by governing authorities to stop preaching and to do things that were a direct violation of God's commands. We earlier saw from the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans #13 that the default position of Christians should be to

obey civil government. But now in this Biblical history of the early church we will learn something from the example of the Apostle Paul when Christians should claim their rights and object to the behavior of civil government.

I.

In a brief survey of Acts #13 & 14 we will look at THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY as we see that PAUL GIVES UP RIGHTS. (I. FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY--- PAUL GIVES...) The Apostle Paul was a student of the famous first century rabbi Gamaliel. Paul was initially involved in persecuting Christians. But he had a dramatic conversion experience and was assigned by Jesus to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

One of the many assets which Paul brought to his missionary outreaches was his Roman citizenship. Reference is made to this in Acts #22 vv. 7 & 8. (ACTS 22:7) There we are told, **“So the tribune came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ (ACTS 22:28) The tribune answered, ‘I bought this citizenship for a large sum.’ Paul said, ‘But I am a citizen by birth.’”** A Roman tribune was comparable in rank to a lieutenant colonel in the US Army.

Only a minority of people in the first century in the Roman Empire, especially in these outer provinces, possessed Roman citizenship. Roman citizenship entitled Romans to vote in Roman assemblies, to hold certain offices, to have various legal rights, and to have certain business privileges. Citizenship was obtained by birth, as here with Paul, by grant for special services to Rome, and sometimes, as here with this Roman officer, payment of a significant amount of money.

At birth Roman citizens received a kind of wooden birth certificate (ROMAN CITIZENSHIP) called a “diptych,” which was about 7 inches by 6 inches in size. Witnesses to the birth and to the status of the family as citizens were listed on it. This also functioned as a kind of passport and voter ID later on in life. According to the Roman historian Suetonius false claims to Roman citizenship received a penalty of beheading by an ax. I suspect that this was a pretty effective method of cutting down on voter fraud.

In Acts #13 the church comprised of Jews and Gentiles in the large city of Antioch in Syria sends out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) They first go to the island of Cyprus. Then they go across to Asia Minor, what we know today as Turkey. The two missionaries develop a pattern of going to the synagogue in the various towns and preaching there until they get kicked out. The Jewish leaders bring in additional Gentile opposition and the two missionaries are run out of town.

We will see how this works out in the town of Lystra. According to Acts #14 vv. 8-10 (p. 923), **“Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And he sprang up and began walking.”**

Obviously these displays of supernatural power were effective in getting the attention of the Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles initially thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods.

We will skip down to vv. 18-20: **“Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.”**

Treating a Roman citizen like this was illegal. Roman citizens were not supposed to be punished without a trial. There could be severe consequences for offenders in a situation like this. The question is: Why did Paul not pursue legal actions against his offenders?

I see four possible explanations. **First**, it appears that this was a mob action that was taken against him. It does not appear that any officials were directly involved. So it may have taken some work to identify the specific perpetrators. **Second**, Barnabas was not a Roman citizen. So there was little legal protection for him. **Third**, there was no official legal action taken against Paul and Barnabas to keep them from continuing with their mission to preach the gospel. **Fourth**, the pursuit of legal action would probably have distracted them from the pursuit of their basic mission.

That is the main takeaway which we should get from this. Legal actions usually involve a significant expenditure of money and emotional energy and time. The pursuit of legal remedies can distract us from other priorities in life. So it is always necessary to weigh the potential costs and benefits that come from pursuing our rights as citizens against an intrusive civil government.

II.

Acts #16-18 describe THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY where we find that PAUL CLAIMS RIGHTS. (II. THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY...) As Paul and Barnabas prepare to undertake their second missionary journey, they have a dispute about whether to bring John Mark with them. Even godly Christians can have disagreements about methodology and personnel. So they both pick new partners. Paul chooses to go out with Silas, who is also a Roman citizen. Thus they set out on a second missionary trip.

A.

The two of them visit PHILIPPI, according to Acts #16. It is there that PAUL OBJECTS TO POLICE BRUTALITY. (II. SECOND... A. PHILIPPI--- PAUL OBJECTS...) Initially Paul and Silas visit the churches which had been established in Asia Minor on Paul's first trip. Barnabas brings John Mark with him as they return to Cyprus.

(SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) After Paul and Silas visit churches previously established in Asia Minor, they end up in western Asia Minor. There Paul has a vision

where he is directed to cross the Adriatic Sea and bring the gospel to Europe. Their first major stop is Philippi in what we know as Greece. There are not enough Jews there for a synagogue. But Paul and Silas encounter a Jewish businesswoman at a place of prayer who takes them into her home.

In vv. 16-24 of #16 we find out what happened: **“As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.’ 18 And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour. 19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. 20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, ‘These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.’ 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. 23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”**

The motive for the action taken against the Christians is financial. The slave owners have lost the demonic abilities of this girl. But they charge Paul and Silas before the magistrates with disturbing the peace and with promoting unlawful religious customs. They preface their remarks with a negative attack on Jews.

Judaism was generally tolerated in most of the Roman Empire. But probably about a year earlier Emperor Claudius had kicked all of the Jews out of the city of Rome. Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that it had close ties to the Roman government. It is understandable that Roman officials at Philippi would have picked up on these anti-Semitic attitudes. But still such treatment of Roman citizens was illegal.

The story continues in vv. 25: **“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’”** Paul proceeds to explain the gospel, and the jailer and his family believe.

Skipping down to v. 35: **“But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, ‘Let those men go.’ 36 And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, ‘The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.’ 37 But Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.’ 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39 So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.”**

Here Paul and Barnabas claim their rights. They were beaten by police officials with the approval of higher officials. So they demand to see these local officials and to receive an apology from them. By the reaction that they receive, it is clear that the local officials realize that they could be in trouble. But Paul and Silas pursue no further legal action. Why is that the case?

Again they have a bigger missionary project on their agenda. But they also leave Philippi with a certain protection for the Christian community there. For the officials are very much aware of the connection of Paul and Silas with these Christians. They are certain to realize that any active persecution against the Christians could result in Paul and Silas bringing up their mistreatment to higher Roman officials. Thus a certain claiming of legal rights by Paul and Silas in this situation results in protection for the local Christian church.

B.

We find another interesting interaction with civil government at their next stop in **THESSALONICA**. (II. A. B. THESSALONICA--- PAUL GETS THWARTED...) In Acts #17 PAUL GETS THWARTED BY CIVIL GOVERNMENT. Thessalonica is 100 miles to the southwest of Philippi. It is the capital and largest city in the Roman province of Macedonia. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY)

According to the first four verses of #17, **“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’ 4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.”** Thus Paul follows his normal pattern of evangelism in first going to the synagogue. Probably the three weeks of preaching in the synagogue is followed by a longer stay in the city. For at the end of Paul’s letter to the Philippians he speaks of receiving a gift more than once from the Philippian Christians while he was at Thessalonica. But then opposition follows.

Verses 5-9: **“But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. 6 And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, 7 and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’ 8 And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. 9 And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”**

The original term here for “city authorities” was equivalent to what we would call city councilmen. An ancient inscription from Thessalonica says that there were five of them. There were two charges made against Barnabas and Silas. One was that they were disturbing the peace. The other was that they were guilty of treason, in that they were promoting another king. This was ironic in that the Jews were behind this charge. Theologically they should have believed that God was their true king.

The response that the city authorities had was clever. They required bond money or some kind of lien from the Christians. The deal was that if these two Christian leaders ever showed up again in Thessalonica, they would forfeit this money, which was probably quite a lot. In 1 Thessalonians #2 v. 18 (1 THESSALONIANS 2:18) Paul would later write this to the Christians there: **“...we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.”** It is probably this bond deal to which Paul is referring.

Sometimes civil government is successful in shutting down the plans of Christians and churches, at least in the short term. The church in Thessalonica continued. The gospel went forward. But Paul and Silas were apparently unable to show up again to encourage and strengthen the Christians there. In such situations Christians must trust that God has His purposes. We can also pray that God will remove barriers for the advance of His kingdom.

C.

After Thessalonica Paul goes to Berea and then to Athens. That is a large city filled with a variety of philosophies and theologies. He doesn't encounter much opposition there, but the response to the gospel is small. Then he goes to CORINTH. (II. A. B. C. CORINTH--- A CIVIL RULER...) There A CIVIL RULER PROVIDENTIALLY INTERVENES. Paul's adventures in Corinth are the focus of #18. Corinth is a Roman colony and a large city. (CORINTH SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY)

We pick up the story at the beginning of #18: **“After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them...”** (CORINTH AERIAL) Claudius is the emperor. One ancient historian suggests that it was disputes over Jesus which led to the expulsion of the Jews. The year was about 49 AD.

Verses 3 & 4: **“...and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.”** Paul was trained as a rabbi. Rabbis were typically expected to learn an additional trade. Paul’s skill as a tentmaker allowed him to serve as a bivocational missionary.

According to vv. 5 & 6, **“When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’”** Paul in Corinth is following his typical strategy of preaching first in the synagogue and then going to the Gentiles.

Verses 7 & 8: **“And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.”** Titius Justus is apparently a Gentile who had been attracted to the God of Israel.

Verses 9-11: **“And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”** Paul certainly needed a time of calmer ministry. But toward the end of his stay there was again opposition.

Beginning in v. 12 we read, **“But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, 13 saying, ‘This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.’ 14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. 15 But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.’ 16 And he drove them from the tribunal. 17 And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

From secular history we know that Gallio became governor of the Roman province of Achaia in July of 51 AD. He served for less than a year in Corinth, the capital of this province. Gallio was the brother of Seneca, who was the tutor of Nero, who became the next Roman emperor.

The charge in v. 13 is that Paul is teaching things contrary to the law. We don’t know whether the reference is to Roman law or Jewish law. Judaism was generally tolerated

in the Roman Empire. But we saw a little earlier that Emperor Claudius had recently expelled the Jews from Rome. So Gallio was unlikely to be warm toward the Jews. The Jews at Corinth were hoping for a broader ruling against the Christians. By virtue of Gallio's position as a Roman governor, such a ruling would be helpful to them. But their effort backfired.

The point here is that God sovereignly worked through this pagan governor to protect the work of Christ in Corinth. Life does not always work out in this way. But sometimes God graciously and sovereignly uses civil rulers to protect the advance of the kingdom of God. Certainly we can see evidence of that in our country's history. We still see judges often siding with Christians and churches in this country on the basis of the constitutional protection we have in the First Amendment concerning freedom of religion. Just a couple of days ago the US Supreme Court ruled that the California government cannot prohibit multiple families from meeting in private homes for religious worship, even in the face of an epidemic.

III.

In Acts #19 we come to the THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY. (III. THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY--- PAUL CURRIES...) We find here that PAUL CURRIES FAVOR WITH CIVIL GOVERNMENT. After Corinth, Paul and Silas made their way back to their sending church in Antioch. Paul then sets out on his third missionary journey. Silas is not with him this time.

(THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Ephesus in western Asia Minor is Paul's primary stop on this trip. We pick up the story in v. 8 of #19: **“And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”**

Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. It was a seaport and a trading center on the west coast of Asia Minor. It was also a religious tourist destination. It was the center of worship for the goddess Artemis. (EPHESUS TEMPLE ARTEMIS) The temple to her in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The mention of Asia in v. 10 is a reference not to the continent but to the Roman province of Asia in the western part of Asia Minor. Paul follows his usual pattern of first going to the synagogue in the city. Then he teaches in a school hall.

Verses 11 & 12: **“And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.”** Supernatural power again catches the attention of the residents of this pagan city. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Skipping down to v. 18: **“Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. 19 And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. 20 So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”** Ephesus was evidently a center of occult and demonic activity. That claim to supernatural power is countered by Paul’s display of divine power.

Verses 23-27: **“About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. 24 For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. 25 These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, ‘Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. 26 And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. 27 And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.”** Notice that the Christians are referred to as the Way. Notice also that the motivation for the attack upon the Christians is economic. People selling idols are losing business. But this also tells us that the gospel is truly making inroads in the city

Verses 28-31 describe the riot which ensues: **“When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ 29 So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHEBUS THEATER) dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. 30 But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. 31 And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater.”** Remains of that theater are still visible today.

Asiarchs were current and past officials who had served one year terms in Ephesus as presidents in charge of games and festivals which honored the emperor and promoted worship of local gods like Artemis. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The story concludes in vv. 32-41: **“Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. 33 Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. 34 But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’**

35 And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, ‘Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky 36 Seeing then

that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. 37 For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. 38 If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. 39 But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. 40 For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.’ 41 And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.”

The thing to notice here is that after two years in town Paul has developed friendships with officials high in the local government. These officials were charged with promoting emperor worship and worship of local gods. Why would they be friendly to Paul? The answer involves a certain amount of speculation. Perhaps Paul had reached out to them in some way. One thing the text says is that the Christian influence had reduced occult activity in Ephesus. That is always a good thing for community life. Asiarchs may not have supported the black arts.

What other results are produced by the gospel? It tends to produce healthy families. It tends to reduce crime and minimize harmful vices. It promotes love of neighbor and concern for the community. On a large scale these things cannot help but be noticed by governing officials.

Two Georgetown University professors last year produced a study entitled “The Socio-economic Contributions of Religion to American Society: An Empirical Analysis.” (FaithCounts.com/report) Among their findings was that religious groups were responsible for 130,000 alcohol and drug abuse recovery programs, 94,000 programs to support veterans and their families, 26,000 programs to prevent HIV/AIDS and to support those living with the disease, and 121,000 programs to provide support or skills training for unemployed adults. Religious organizations have tripled the amount of money spent on social programs in the last fifteen years--- to \$9 billion.

In our own congregation we have had people serve as volunteers and board members for Emergency Aid, Lend-a-hand, the Veterans’ Home, the Senior Center, and Meals on Wheels. The current president of Emergency Aid was part of our congregation before he moved to Henderson. The president before that was a member of Faith Christian Church. The president before that was from Grace Community Church. Kathleen, who spoke last week, reminded us of our connection with prison ministry. We have other volunteers and chaplains who lead Bible studies behind bars. We do these things primarily to serve the Lord, but an added benefit is that these activities curry favor with government. Civil government cannot help but notice the contributions that Christians make to our society.

The example of Paul encourages us to claim our rights as Christian citizens when doing so promotes the advancement of the kingdom of God in some way. Our primary

responsibility is to live out the gospel. When we do that, it will be difficult for civil government to ignore the contributions that we make.