

Introduction

Isn't it interesting how just about the time we're celebrating or about to celebrate success in something, controversy has a way of rearing its ugly head?

Today we see something similar—as Paul is sharing the amazing success of the Gospel among the Gentiles, he's faced with a controversy he will ultimately have to address

A. Paul reports all that God had done among the gentiles through him (READ 21:15-19)

1. The believers in Jerusalem give Paul a warm and friendly reception (17):
  - a. There's actually some emphasis here
  - b. Not only does Luke use a verb and an adverb that both imply a happiness to the reception, but he placed the adverb "**glad**" in front of the verb in the Greek text for emphasis
  - c. The brethren in Jerusalem were truly happy to see Paul and his traveling companions

Visiting Dave and Joy Nutting—not only big smiles and hugs, but they often invite their kids over to join us as well; they are truly glad to see us!

2. The very next day Paul meets with James and the church elders (18-19):
  - a. Luke only mentions James and the elders which suggests that Peter, John and the other Apostles were not there:
    - 1) The Bible doesn't tell us much about where the Apostles went
    - 2) The best we have is Church tradition which suggests:
      - a) Peter ended up in Rome
      - b) Andrew went to Syria, possibly with Matthias, and then on to Asia Minor, Turkey, Greece and the region around Russia
      - c) Bartholomew, Thomas, and James, son of Alpheus, appear to have spent time in the region east of Syria and possibly India, before Bartholomew went on to Armenia, Ethiopia, and Southern Arabia
      - d) Philip possibly went to North Africa and Asia Minor
      - e) Simon the Zealot ministered in Persia
      - f) John spent time around Ephesus and was later exiled to the island of Patmos
  - b. We know that one of the reasons Paul was meeting with the church leaders was to present the gifts he had collected for the Jerusalem saints; even though Luke doesn't mention it here, Paul does in Acts 24:17
  - c. However, there was another item on the agenda for the meeting and that was to report what God had done in the land of the gentiles (REREAD 21:19):
    - 1) He told them "**one by one**" what God had done among the gentiles; some translations render this "**in detail**" but more specifically Paul was recounting each of the events that happened, in one city after the next:
      - a) He likely listed the vast number of regions and cities to which he had been:
        - The region of Galatia and cities like Lystra, Derbe and Antioch Pisidia
        - On into Asia to cities like Laodicea, Ephesus, and Troas;

- Further east into Macedonia and cities like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea
  - And even south into Greece to the cities of Athens and Corinth
- b) He likely shared how in almost every city, despite the rejection, opposition, and persecution he faced by the Jews, multitudes and multitudes of Gentiles believed the Gospel:
- He probably told them about the vision God used to call him to Macedonia (Acts 16), and the conversion of Lydia, the demon possessed slave girl, and the jailer and his entire household (Acts 16)
  - He probably told them about the large number of gentiles and leading men and women who believe in the cities of Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17)
  - I can't imagine he would leave out the amazing experience of preaching the Gospel to all the city leaders in the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17)
  - He certainly would have told them about his year and a half in Corinth (Acts 18) and his three years in Ephesus (19)
  - Throughout all this, he probably shared all of the miraculous things God did like rescuing him and Silas from prison in Lystra (Acts 16), the number of times the Lord rescued him from the Jews, all the extra-ordinary miracles God did through him at Ephesus (Acts 19), and maybe even how God raised from the dead the young man who fell out of the window when Paul preached late into the night at Troas (Acts 20)
- 2) If you notice, Luke is careful to tell us that as Paul recounted these things, he gave all the credit to God: **“he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentles through his ministry”** (19)
- a) In Acts 19:11, Luke declares unequivocally that it was God who deserved the credit for all that had taken place in Ephesus
  - b) Likewise, when Paul is recounting the events that had taken place among the gentiles over the past 14 years, he didn't take credit for it but gave all the glory and credit to the Lord
  - c) Paul's aversion to boasting and taking credit for something God did is apparent in his letter to the Corinthians (READ 2 Corinthians 11:30-12:9)
3. Takeaway: success in anything, especially ministry, should always be attributed to God:
- a. This doesn't mean we disparage our own skills, abilities, gifting or hard work
  - b. It simply means that we recognize that God is the one who gave us those things and He is the One who works within and through us to accomplish what He wills
  - c. He is the one who ultimately deserves the credit for everything

<b>B. James informs Paul of the controversy that has arisen over his ministry (Acts 21:20-22)</b>
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1. The elders' immediate response is to glorify God for what He had done among the Gentiles (20a)
2. However, there's nothing like a little controversy to put a damper on things (20b-21):
  - a. Just as the Lord had brought 1000's of Gentiles into His Kingdom through the ministry of Paul, He had done the same among Jews in Judea through the ministries of James and others
  - b. These Jewish Christians were **“zealous for the Law”** (20b)—this means two things:

- 1) First, they were ardent observers of the Law and Jewish customs even though they were now Christians
  - 2) Second, they believed this should be the case for **ALL** Jewish Christians
- c. The controversy is that they had **mistakenly** come to believe that Paul was teaching Jews to “**forsake Moses**” by abandoning the Law (e.g. circumcision) and Jewish customs (21):
- 1) This is apparently a different controversy than what we saw back in Acts 15 where Jewish Christians were demanding that Gentiles had to obey the Law or they couldn’t be saved; this was ultimately rejected and settled by the Apostles
  - 2) Here in this passage, the issue is whether or not **Christian Jews** should be expected to obey the Law
3. This poses some interesting questions:
- a. Did Paul teach Jews to abandon the Law?
    - 1) The short answer is there’s no evidence in the Bible that he did; In fact, Paul’s circumcision of Timothy suggests otherwise (Timothy was half Jewish and Paul circumcised him to prevent offending the Jews)
    - 2) What Paul did teach regarding the Law can be summed up in the following two statements:
      - a) The first is that observance of the Law was not a means to salvation because that only comes by grace through faith in Jesus:
        - Paul made the case in the Epistle to the Romans that those who attempt to be justified by the Law make themselves slaves to the Law and will ultimately be condemned by the Law (Romans 2-3)
        - However, he also says that in the Law we have the “**embodiment of knowledge and of the truth**” (Romans 2:20), that it is “**holy**”, “**righteous**”, and “**good**” (Romans 7:12), and that the requirement of the Law is “**fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**” (Romans 8:4) because “**Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes**” in Him (Romans 10:4)
      - b) The second is that living according to the Law and Jewish customs as a means of honoring God (not for salvation) was a matter of personal choice and conscience (Romans 14:1-23)
  - b. Did Paul still observe the Law and Jewish customs himself?
    - 1) It appears that he still celebrated Pentecost (Acts 20:16)
    - 2) On at least one occasion he made and kept a Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18)
    - 3) Later in our passage, James indicates that Paul was someone who “**walk[ed] orderly, keeping the Law**”, and he even submitted to James request that he demonstrate this by following the purification laws which included a temple sacrifice (Acts 21:26)
    - 4) Paul’s approach to the Law, as a Jew, is best summarized in 1 Corinthians 9:19-21 (READ)
4. The false accusations against Paul were certain to cause controversy, so James and the elders sought a solution (22)
5. Takeaway: success is often overshadowed by unsubstantiated or unnecessary controversy:

New Hope musicians getting upset over music at our 1 year anniversary

- a. Obviously, genuine controversy is something to be concerned with and I don't mean to imply otherwise; God calls us to be holy and righteous in anything we do
- b. However, often it's the little non-sin related things that erupt into unnecessary controversies and they can overshadow what God is doing or had done
- c. Paul had a great attitude about this in Philippians 1:15-19 (READ)

c. Paul submits to James' request (READ Acts 21:23-26)

1. To help assuage the controversy, James asks Paul to do something:
  - a. There were four Christian Jews who had taken a Nazarite vow, and Paul was to take them to the temple to finish their vows
  - b. He was to pay their expenses (this covered having their hair cut off, as well as the cost of the sacrifices)
  - c. He was also to purify himself along with the men (a seven-day period) so that he could enter the temple for the sacrifices to be made on their behalf
2. It's clear that James' intent was twofold:
  - a. The first was to correct the misinformation regarding Paul and protect Paul's ministry:
    - 1) Look back at 19:24: **“and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law”**
    - 2) Paul was a Jew and it would have been offensive to other Jews—even Christian Jews—for Paul to disregard the Law and accepted Jewish customs
    - 3) By asking Paul to join the four men, James hoped to reassure the Jewish Christians that Paul was no lawbreaker
    - 4) Paul did something similar when he circumcised Timothy (who was half Jewish) so he would not be an offense to the Jews and negatively impact their ministry
  - b. The second was to preserve the unity of the body of Christ:
    - 1) Back in chapter 15, a debate arose about whether Gentiles needed to practice the Law in order to be saved
    - 2) The Apostles and elders settled that dispute with a resounding “no” (since both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace and not works of the Law), but they also encouraged the Gentiles to be sensitive to the Jews and provided them with a list of things to avoid
    - 3) James reiterates the same thing here which makes it clear that his intent was to preserve the unity of the body (READ 21:25)
3. In a remarkable display of understanding, wisdom and humility, Paul does just as James requests (REREAD 26):
  - a. Paul could have responded by claiming that he was no longer bound by the Law because of his relationship with Jesus
  - b. However, he understood the need to be sensitive to his fellow Jewish believers—not only for the sake of his own ministry but for the sake of unity within the body of Christ
4. Takeaway: genuine, Godly success rarely (if ever) comes without submission and humility