

ACTS: ALIGNING WITH GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK OF DISCIPLING

LIV. The Need For Truth Among Christians

(Acts 21:20b-36)

I. Introduction

- A. The book of Acts explains "the orderly and sovereignly directed progress of the kingdom message from Jews to Gentiles, and from Jerusalem to Rome," Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 351. We can thus learn much about aligning our ministry efforts with God's sovereign work from studying the book of Acts.
- B. Acts 21:20b-36 records how an errant promotion of the Law and an errant report about Paul among believing Jews in Israel led to a lot of trouble for Paul. The incident provides a moving illustration of the need for truth among Christians, and we view the passage for our insight and edification (as follows):

II. The Need For Truth Among Christians, Acts 21:20b-36.

- A. Though the leaders of the Jerusalem Church glorified God upon hearing the things He had achieved among the Gentiles through the ministry of Paul and his coworkers (Acts 21:20a), they spoke to Paul about a problem regarding the truth and that also concerned him that had risen among many Hebrew believers, Acts 21:20b-21:
 - 1. First, many thousands of Hebrews had come to faith in Christ, but they were all zealous for the Mosaic Law, Acts 21:20b. This zeal rubbed against the truth that believers in Christ were positionally dead to the Mosaic Law by the body of Christ that they should be wed to Christ to bring forth fruits of righteousness unto God, Romans 7:4. Such zeal for the Mosaic Law also threatened the unity of the Church that was composed of Hebrews and Gentiles, for it pressured Gentiles to submit to circumcision, what also had created the rift in the Church that had been healed by the First Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-32.
 - 2. Second, an errant claim had spread among these Hebrew Christians that Paul had taught Hebrews in Gentile lands to forsake the Mosaic Law, that they should not even circumcise their sons, Acts 20:21. Paul had indeed not pushed the dictates of the Law on Gentile believers, but he had certainly not taught Hebrews to violate their Hebrew customs by not circumcising their sons, *Ibid.*, p. 416.
- B. Since this matter threatened the unity of the Church and its testimony before unsaved Hebrews, the Jerusalem Church leaders advised Paul to join in the purification rites of four Hebrew men who had taken a Nazirite vow and pay their expenses in accord with the Mosaic Law, Acts 20:22-24; Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, fn. to Acts 21:24. This action that would require Paul as a Hebrew to be seen functioning in line with the Law in the temple was intended to counter the false charge that he taught Hebrews to violate their customs.
- C. The Jerusalem Church leaders added that their First Jerusalem Council position of Acts 15 was not violated by this action, that Paul's involvement as a Hebrew in paying for these four men's vow obligations would not counter their earlier decision that Gentiles did not need to observe the Mosaic Law, Acts 21:25.
- D. Since Paul's principle in ministry was "to become all things to all men," and applied to this case, to become as a Jew that he might win Jews (1 Corinthians 9:19-22), he agreed to this advice, Acts 21:26.
- E. However, while he was in the temple performing his planned functions, some Hebrews from Asia saw him there and stirred up the crowd, charging that Paul opposed the Law and the temple, and that he had polluted the temple by bringing Gentiles into it, a capital offense, Acts 21:27-28. They had earlier seen Paul with the Gentile Trophimus of Ephesus, so they assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple, Acts 21:29.
- F. The entire city of Jerusalem was thus aroused, and all the people ran together from all directions to take Paul out of the temple whereupon the gates were shut so that "no one could proceed beyond the court of the Gentiles and thus defile the temple," Acts 21:30; *Ibid.*, Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 417.
- G. While the crowd was trying to kill Paul, news of the riot reached the Roman commander of the troops at the Fortress of Antonia that was located at the northwest wall of the temple, so he took at least 200 soldiers (two centurions with their troops) to rescue Paul from the infuriated crowd, Acts 21:31-33; *Ibid.*
- H. The throng began shouting conflicting charges against Paul, and since the commander could not discern from the noise what Paul had done, he brought Paul into the Roman barracks of the fortress, his soldiers carrying Paul aloft when they came to the stairs due to the crowd's violence and cries for his execution, Acts 21:34-36.

Lesson: *Because of a failure by Hebrew believers in Christ to hold strongly to their freedom from the Mosaic Law and because of Paul's being misrepresented by Hebrew believers as forbidding Hebrews in Gentile lands from practicing their customs of the Law, Paul was put into a dangerous, troubling situation.*

Application: *May we believers in Christ relate to God, to one another and to all men in alignment with God's truth.*