



The Custom Conflicted Church

Acts 21:17-36

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**This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

We're coming to the last few sermons in our series, "Acts, Church Afire!" To bring you up to speed, the Apostle Paul and his companions arrive in Jerusalem, after receiving many warnings about the imprisonments that await Paul. His return to the church starts off quite well— at least for one night. At first, the Jerusalem church welcomed Paul, praised God, and celebrated with him when they heard his stories of all that God had done among the Gentiles. However, that warmth and praise lasted pretty much one day.

Two seconds later, they say to him, "well... brother... you see... we've got a lot of law-loving Jews in this church..." Essentially, there was deep contention brewing up in the Jerusalem church among the Jewish Christians over the Gentile Christians. James and the elders pretty much wasted no time in letting Paul know what the Jewish Christians were mumbling about. They understood Paul and the Gentile Christians to be anti-law, anti-Moses, and therefore, anti-Jew, though Paul was a Jew himself.

So, they instructed Paul to do something pretty serious and quite concerning— they pretty much told him to prove his 'Jewishness' by publicly following the law for a week. The most concerning part is that Paul agreed to do what they asked. If you don't know Paul's heart, you're going to read this and think he's a people-pleasing hypocrite... especially when you find out all that he was being asked to do, which included sacrificing animals for the forgiveness of sins. Well, Paul knew what he was doing, and there is something to be learned from him in this story. There is also something to be warned about.

So, let's get to the Scripture. I invite you to read Acts 21:17-36 with me.

Acts 21:17-36

17 When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters 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 everyone 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.

Paul Arrested

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, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple 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.)

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, “Get rid of him!”

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ac 21:17–36.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Cultural customs carry significant weight in the identities of individuals in a society. The culture is held together by overarching beliefs, values, religious ideals, language, shared history, and such. Customs give legs to the culture; they are the specific actions or behaviors evolving over long periods of time that reflect the culture. You can be immersed in a particular culture but if you don’t practice the customs of that culture then you can’t truly be identified with the people of the culture. You’re among them but not of them. It won’t take long for the people of the culture to recognize you as not one of their own. On the other hand, if you observe the customs of the culture, then the people will naturally take you in as one of their own. Cultural customs prove cultural identity.

A Culture Clash with Christian Identity

The Apostle Paul was Jewish, but he was beginning to skirt the lines. He was in the Jewish culture but falling out of practice with the customs of the culture. He wasn’t trying to become less Jewish, but he was becoming less dependent on Jewish identity for his standing before God. His revelation of Jesus Christ introduced a tension to his identity. Christianity was pulling him further away in practice from the heart of the law of Moses—which is the whole sacrificial system and the law of circumcision. At the same time, he saw Christ as the fulfillment of the law for our sake, and the Holy Spirit as the Helper who writes the law on our hearts. So, his Christianity was pulling at his Jewish identity while simultaneously boosting his sense of what it means to be a true Jew in Christ.

Paul needed to grapple with this building tension. This is a tension that every Christian will face. Ask yourself, what parts of my culture, my background, my worldview, my identity as defined

by my customs do I hold tightly? What am I willing to lay down for Christ? What is Christ asking me to lay down, and what is Christ not asking me to lay down?

Remain in the World But Be Not of the World

Jesus encouraged us to remain in the world but to not be of the World. The Apostle Paul speaks clearly about both sides of this pulling tension. In 1 Cor. 9, he says, “Am I not free? Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 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. 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... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel.” Paul understood exactly what Christ meant for his own freedom, but he chose to wear the chains of another soul for the sake of winning that soul to Christ.

Yet, on the other hand, Paul also says in Phil. 3, “If someone thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;... But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ- the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

This is Paul talking about throwing away his old cultural identity for his new identity in Christ. Do you see the inner tension in Paul? So, do we hold onto our identity or throw it away? Do we assume our cultural identity sometimes and distance ourselves from it at other times? That sounds hypocritical! How do we work this out??

Paul’s Eyebrow Raising Compromise From Freedom in Christ

In vss. 23-24 James and the elders of the Jerusalem church instruct Paul to go with the four young men, join in their purification rites in the temple, and pay all their expenses. The final offering of that rite included bringing two lambs without blemish, along with other grain offerings to the priest in the temple, who would sacrifice them on the altar and then wave the offerings before the Lord. This is exactly what Jesus set believers free from. It is hard to imagine Paul agreeing to this, but he went quietly and did exactly that. Not only did he go with them and pay for all these sacrifices, but the Scripture indicates he would’ve participated in them himself had he not been arrested first!

How could Paul do this with any kind of clear conscience? The scholar F.F. Bruce put it this way, “A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.”¹ In other words, Paul was SO set free that even his past chains could not chain him down again even if he wore them once more. He could go back to his past customs without returning to his old identity.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 432

This is how Paul was able to walk back into the temple and go through the initial purification rites while remaining a steadfastly devoted believer. He knew he did not need to do them for his salvation. He knew where he stood in the grace of Christ. He was able to do it by his freedom from needing to do it. My friends, when you are truly freed from something, even when you are surrounded by it you will not be owned by it. That is the kind of freedom that Christ has given to us.

Warning: The Deeper Issue is About the Old Identity

There is also a warning to us here. The leaders of the Jerusalem church aren't directing Paul to sin. Had Paul actually been given the chance to participate in the sacrifice, he would have been present physically, but spiritually you know he would've been silently praying to Christ. The sacrifice would've been nothing more than a barbecue in the temple as far as he was concerned.

However, there is a deeper issue involved in the Jerusalem church leadership's instructions. They are worried about what the Jews think of the church. They are worried about their Jewish identity. Yes, they confess faith in Christ, they fully believe in Jesus, but they cannot let go of Moses. They are being defined by Moses and the law, not by Jesus and his grace.

My friends, this the warning for us today. The danger is not that we'll reject Jesus, it is that we will not let go of our old identity while we try to cling to Christ. If you hold onto that old identity, your new identity in Christ will clash with your old identity and leave you confused about your life, and who you are.

Paul's old identity was his cultural heritage as a Jew. For us, it might be traditions, or philosophical beliefs that compete with the Bible. Or It might be old ways of life that you know Christ has set you free from but you're just not there yet. It might be a political identity—holding tightly to a political affiliation and all the practices that identify you as one of their own, while Jesus is saying... "Be in the world, not of it." Think of anything you need in your life to make you feel like you belong outside of simply belonging to Christ. All these things compete with the new identity and freedom that Christ has given to you.

I Have Become All Things... For What?

Let's go back to the Corinthians passage. Paul said, "I have become all things to all people that I might save some." What does this mean? Well, it does not mean covering over the hard truths of the gospel. Churches can become so desperate to be culturally hip that they hide the hard truths of the gospel. It doesn't mean becoming a camouflage Christian so as to avoid offending others. It doesn't mean reshaping the message of Jesus to fit cultural ideals and practices.

Instead, Jesus sets us free to break down the barriers between Christ and sinners. He sets us free that we might enter into the unbeliever's world and build meaningful friendships with them. He sets us free that we might learn the language of sinners without being tainted by sin so that we can speak to them in a way they understand and lead them to freedom in Christ. I think a good picture is the former alcoholic being so set free from alcoholism that he can be around other alcoholics without indulging in drunkenness so as to be an example to his drinking buddies of true freedom from the bottle. The key point is that you're breaking down barriers specifically to point people to a new identity in Christ.

Another Warning: The Cross Offends

Still, this story gives us another caution from irony. In Vss. 27-36, just as Paul and the four are about to bring in the sacrifices, unbelieving Jews see Paul and start a riot. As Paul is arrested, they shout, “This is the man who teaches everywhere against our people and our law and this temple.” “Get rid of him!” Here’s a bit of irony from this story for us: you can do everything to break down the barriers and point people to Christ, but you can never remove the offense of the cross.

Paul humbled himself, obeyed the church leadership, became as a Jew to win the Jews, went back to customs he knew were useless and futile. Where did it get him? Nowhere. He was pegged as a lawbreaker anyways and someone they wanted to crucify, just as they crucified Christ. Here’s the reality, they weren’t persecuting Paul because he was being insensitive to the Jewish culture. They persecuted him and rejected his message solely because of Jesus. They saw his actions, but the message of Christ was louder than his actions, and they rejected Jesus.

My friends, in the end, no amount of cultural sensitivity can make Christ acceptable to a heart that is bent on rejecting him. The unbelieving crowd in this passage saw through Paul’s facade—they knew that this was really about Jesus. They rejected Paul because they rejected Jesus.

We can do everything imaginable to remove the barriers between Christ and sinners. We can bring in the culture and let it speak loudly in the church walls. We can open up the doors and make the church a comforting place for even the worst of sinners. Individually, we can wear the right clothes, say the right words, look the look, and play the culture perfectly to point people to Christ. We can try all of that, but if our ultimate aim is truly to point people to Jesus... well, there will always be the one barrier that opposing hearts will see through all of that— Jesus Christ himself. Despite our best efforts, the opposition will still shout, “Get rid of them all!”

Why? Because the cross offends. The cross offends because Jesus does not come to affirm the old identity, he came to become your identity. And that brings me back to this question— do you want to belong to your culture, or do you want to belong to Christ? That’s a tough question to wrestle with— cultural identity is an incredibly strong force! I invite you to trust Jesus with your identity.

Three Key Takeaways

In closing, here are three key takeaways from this sermon:

1. Your identity must be found in Christ alone.

Paul participated in Jewish customs because those customs no longer defined him. His identity was secure in Jesus. The danger for us is not necessarily rejecting Christ outright, but trying to cling to old identities—political, cultural, traditional, personal, or even religious—while also claiming Christ. Freedom comes when Christ becomes our primary identity.

Key takeaway: Anything you need to make you feel like you belong apart from Christ is competing with Christ.

2. Christian freedom is not self-centered; it is missional.

Paul became “all things to all people” not because he was compromising, but because he was trying to remove barriers between people and Jesus. True freedom allows us to enter another person’s world without being owned by it. We are free enough to serve others, understand others, and love others for the sake of the gospel.

Key takeaway: Jesus sets us free so we can build bridges to unbelievers without surrendering our allegiance to Him.

3. Even when barriers are removed, the cross will still offend.

Paul did everything possible to accommodate Jewish concerns, yet he was still arrested and rejected. Why? Because the ultimate offense was not Paul—it was Jesus. We should remove unnecessary barriers, but we must never expect the gospel itself to become acceptable to a world that rejects Christ.

Key takeaway: People may reject us, but often what they are really rejecting is Jesus.

I encourage you to live in the world but don’t be owned by it. Build your identity in Christ alone. Use your freedom from those broken identities to bring people to Jesus, and remember that even though we may remove barriers, we cannot remove the offense of the cross.

Let’s pray.

Study Questions
Read Acts 21:17-36

Observation

- 1) What was the initial reception Paul received in Jerusalem?
- 2) How did James and the elders instruct Paul to address the concerns of the Jewish Christians?
- 3) What actions did Paul undertake in response to the instructions from the Jerusalem leaders?
- 4) What triggered the uproar and ensuing arrest of Paul in the temple?

Interpretation

- 1) Why do you think Paul agreed to participate in the purification rites?
- 2) What does the sermon suggest about Paul's view of his cultural Jewish identity?
- 3) How does the sermon interpret Paul's actions in light of Christian freedom?
- 4) In what way does the sermon describe the contrast between cultural identity and identity in Christ?

Application

- 1) How can you relate Paul's struggle of cultural and Christian identity to your own life?
- 2) What are some aspects of your cultural identity you might need to reconsider in light of your faith in Christ?
- 3) How can you use your Christian freedom to become 'all things to all people' today?
- 4) What barriers might you be able to remove in your own life to help others encounter Christ?