

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL AS CHRISTIANS LIVE AS CITIZENS OF TWO KINGDOMS

Acts 22:23-23:11

INTRODUCTION

H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic 1951 book, "Christ and Culture" states that the church has been faced with an enduring problem since its inception some 2000 years ago. This enduring problem has been the relationship between the church or Christianity and the surrounding cultures in which the church lives. He asserts that it is the struggle between the authority of Jesus and the authority of the societies in which we dwell that is our enduring problem. The question can be stated in a straightforward manner: How do I live as a Christian in this time and place? How do I as a Christian relate to and interact with the non-Christian world and society of which I am a part?

This is not only a question of my politics but of my entire way of life. Everything; from the way I get my hair cut to what kind of funeral I want, from the kinds of food I eat to the politicians and public policies I support are all determined as a result of my understanding and experience of being a white, middle-class, baby boomer, citizen of the U.S.A and my understanding and experience of being a Protestant, evangelical, reformed Christian. There are many things that I value and believe and do that are simply the result of being raised in this culture by the parents I was given. There are other things that I value and believe and do that are the result of my understanding of the gospel of Jesus as revealed in the Bible. My whole way of life is the result of the interaction of these two sources of authority in my life. We are Christians and we are citizens of the U.S.A.

Most of us recognize that believing in Jesus is not simply a ticket to heaven when we die but also results in the transformation of our life while we live in this world. We agree with the apostle Peter who tells us, "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." Peter describes our lives here as resident aliens. We are foreigners who live as permanent legal residents in this world. We are citizens of two kingdoms.

In our passage today we observe the apostle Paul living out his dual citizenship. While not every question we might have about the nature of our relationship as Christians to the society in which we live is answered, yet we do find here some direction as to the nature of that relationship. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has included these details of Paul's experiences in Jerusalem not simply as biographical history of the apostle's life but to inform of us how Christians are to live in this world.

I am assuming that everything that Paul does and says in the tense events of this less than 24 hour period he does by the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit. I assume this because Jesus promised his apostles that when they were arrested and brought before the authorities they were not to worry about what to say because the HS would give them words to speak at that moment. What the HS leads Paul to say reflects the fact that Paul as the spokesperson for King Jesus and citizen of his kingdom, which kingdom is not of this world, is also a citizen of earthly kingdoms. As we observe him live out this dual citizenship may the Lord help us to have a clearer understanding of how we are to live as those who are both citizens of heaven and citizens of the U.S.A.

MAIN POINT

Christians are citizens of two kingdoms, therefore...

I. Christians are good citizens of this world's kingdoms (21:38-39, 22:25-28, 23:4-5)

I want us to notice the things that the HS led Paul to say as he is accosted by the outraged mob and then arrested by the Roman soldiers. First, look at what Paul said in last week's passage as the soldiers carry him to the top

of the steps leading into the Roman fortress which was located next to the temple in Jerusalem (21:38-39). When the Roman commander asks if Paul is the Egyptian Jew who hatched a terrorist plot against the Roman government some three years before this; he openly and freely identifies himself as a Jewish man who was a citizen of the city of Tarsus. Then in this morning's text, as the soldiers get ready to torture him by whipping him with the brutal "flagellum", the multi-strapped whip with metal and bone tied to the ends of each strap, Paul identifies himself as a natural born Roman citizen. Paul's aim is to demonstrate to the Roman officer and thus to all legitimate authority that Paul and the church are no threat to the Roman government or any other government. Neither he, nor the church, nor the person of Jesus is out to overthrow the Roman government. Whatever it is that has caused the Jewish people to hate Paul and to try to kill him it is no threat to the Roman Empire.

Samuel Davies, a preacher of the 18th century, during the years leading up to the Revolutionary War said this in a sermon regarding Jesus' statement to Pilate during his trial: "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus said, as much as to say, 'I do not deny that I claim a kingdom, but it is of such a nature, that it need give no alarm to the kings of the earth. Their kingdoms are of this world, but mine is spiritual and divine, and therefore cannot interfere with theirs. If my kingdom were of this world, like theirs, I would take the same methods with them to obtain and secure it; my servants would fight for me, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now, you see, I use no such means for my defense, or to raise me to my kingdom: and therefore you may be assured, my kingdom is not from here, and can give the Roman emperor no reason for suspicion or unease.'"

Paul is not only a good, law-abiding citizen of Tarsus and Rome but also a good member of the society of Jews. They attacked him while performing the rights of purification in the temple according to the law, in other words, while living like a good Jewish person. He appeals to the crowd as a fellow Jew. He recognizes the authority of the OT law over himself in his defense before the Sanhedrin when he quotes Exodus 22:28 which declares that it is wrong to curse a Jewish leader. He openly acknowledges that he is a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee. In all of his conduct among the Jews of Jerusalem he has proven himself a law-abiding, faithful Jewish man. He openly identifies himself as a Jew, a Pharisee, a citizen of Tarsus and a citizen of Rome. By becoming a Christian he did not cease to be these things. When he became a member of Jesus' heavenly kingdom he did not at that time cease to be a citizen of Rome or a member of the Jewish race and religion. He is still responsible and accountable to these earthly kingdoms and societies of men. He is not above the law of men because he is a Christian.

Both in relation to the Romans and to the Jews he has lived as he commands the Christians in Rome to live as stated in Romans 13:1-6. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. "

It is the first inclination of Christians to submit to and cooperate with the various authorities that God has established in this world. We look at police officers and school teachers and football referees and city council members and county supervisors and judges and state assemblymen and U.S Representatives and Presidents as personally appointed by God himself. Every human authority has been established by God and thus our default response to all authorities is respect and obedience and cooperation. We live as good citizens of this world's kingdoms because we recognize that God is the one who rules over us through these kingdoms and these "kings" for our good. It is not only the authorities to which we submit but we conform in many ways, both large and small, to the values and customs and lifestyles of our culture. As we will see there are ways in which our Christian faith requires us to oppose our culture, yet, there are many ways in which we live like the non-Christians among whom we exist and it is right for us to do so.

II. Christians work for justice in this world's kingdoms (22:25-29, 23:1-5)

The second thing that is obvious in Paul's response to both the Roman authorities and the Jewish authorities is that Paul knows the laws and customs of Rome and he knows the laws and customs of the Jewish people. Thus, he does not hesitate to question the legality of what is happening. As the Romans begin to tie him to the posts in preparation for torture he asks the centurion who is in charge: "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who has not stood trial?" The officer immediately halts the proceedings and in some way we are not informed about ascertains that Paul is telling the truth. He then runs to inform his commanding officer, the tribune, that he is about to commit a crime that is punishable by death; he is about to flog a Roman citizen. The tribune cannot believe what he is told and goes to interrogate Paul himself. He informs Paul that he had to pay a large bribe to a Roman bureaucrat to become a citizen. Paul informs the tribune that he was born a citizen, which means that his father or grandfather must have performed some valuable service for the Emperor which was rewarded with citizenship. As soon as Paul says this all the soldiers and the tribune are afraid because they realize they were on the verge of committing a capital crime by flogging a citizen.

The tribune still does not know why the Jews hate Paul so much and so he calls a meeting of the Sanhedrin (v. 30), the Jewish ruling council, so that he can find out from the leaders of the Jews what offense Paul has given to the Jewish people. Paul does not wait for the Sanhedrin to make their false charges against him but begins by declaring that he has lived his life before God with a clear conscience (23:1). In short he is claiming that he is innocent of doing anything contrary to God's will or God's law. He is stating that the charges that he has defiled the temple by bringing Gentiles into it and that he teaches people to ignore the Law of Moses are false. However, before he can demonstrate that his faith in Jesus and preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles is not against God, but according to God's will, the chief priest, a man named Ananias commands that Paul be punched in the face to stop him from speaking. Recovering from the blow, Paul announces God's judgment on the chief priest in a voice that all can hear: "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" So just like he knows Roman law so he knows Jewish law. He knows that the chief priest has broken the law and does not hesitate to publicly confront the injustice. Paul, the accused, has reversed the roles and has placed himself in the role of judge, accusing and condemning the chief priest.

Many people read this announcement of judgment by Paul, not as a good thing but as an example of Paul losing his temper. They say he is acting in a hypocritical way since he wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:12, "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure..." Those who see Paul being inappropriately angry will especially point to the next two verses where, after Paul is rebuked by some standing there that he has reviled the chief priest, Paul appears to apologize. He seems to be saying that he didn't know it was the chief priest and if he had known then he wouldn't have announced God's judgment, called him a whitewashed wall or accused him of being a hypocrite. While it is possible to read this event this way and thus Luke is simply showing us that Paul is a sinner, like us, yet I don't think that is what is happening here.

Paul is doing exactly what God wants him to do. He is announcing God's just judgment on a hypocritical human judge who is pretending to be acting on God's behalf. He is standing up to injustice, as God wants him to do. Why do I think that, especially in light of his apparent apology in v.5? Before I explain myself, let me tell you why I think it is important for me to explain myself. One of my goals in preaching each Sunday is to help you to be better readers of the Bible. While the Bible is clear in what it says, yet what it says is not always said in the simplest way. Every particular verse in the Bible has to be understood both in its own context and in the context of the whole Bible. There are many erroneous and heretical teachings in the Christian church which are the result of reading the Bible in an overly simplistic manner. It takes time and effort to work out the meaning of these texts. "The Bible," as one of my favorite Bible teachers, Dr. Howard Hendricks, has said, "does not yield its fruit to the lazy."

So here are the reasons that I am sure that Paul is confronting injustice and not simply being inappropriately angry. First, Jesus told his disciples on numerous occasions what he said in Luke 21:12-15, "...you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it

therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.” It is hard for me to see how Luke, knowing this promise of Jesus, would record words from Paul that were not in accord with the will of Jesus. This is the exact scenario that Jesus described and so we should expect that Paul is saying what Jesus told him to say, as he promised he would do. Second, Jesus, in his trial before this same council in this same location said something very similar to this. In John 18:22-23 we are told, “When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’ Jesus answered him, ‘If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?’” So Paul is challenging an unjust blow and defending his standing up to the chief priest, just like Jesus did. Third, the use of the metaphor “whitewashed wall” has a long history in God’s condemning the hypocritical leaders of Israel. Ezekiel uses this metaphor in his condemnation of the false prophets of Israel (Ezekiel 13:10-16) and Jesus calls these same people “whitewashed tombs” in Matthew 23:27. Fourth, Paul’s denunciation of the chief priest is not based on personal irritation but upon the Law of Moses which commands judges to treat the accused as if they are innocent until proven guilty. He is not simply cursing someone who has cursed him but announcing God’s just judgment on a lawbreaker. Fifth, in v. 11 Jesus appears to Paul the following night and assures him that just as he has borne witness to him in Jerusalem so he will bear witness in Rome. Jesus affirms Paul’s conduct in Jerusalem as his faithfully bearing witness. It would be hard to imagine him saying this if at least a part of what Paul did was sinful.

So how are we to understand Paul’s apparent apology in v. 5? The way that many have read Paul’s response, beginning with Augustine and including John Calvin, is that Paul knows Ananias is the chief priest and thus he is speaking ironically. He is saying, “I thought he was the high priest but then, when he ordered me to be struck, I assumed he wasn’t the high priest because high priests do not act like this Ananias. The chief priest is supposed to be the one who adheres to the Law of Moses and as he clearly broke it he was not acting like the chief priest and thus I justly condemned him. If he would have acted like the chief priest then I would have obeyed the Law of Moses which commands us to not speak evil of our rulers.”

Thus we witness in Paul a Christian who has a full understanding of the laws and customs of the societies in which he lives. He is wise and discerning in his use of those laws and customs. He recognizes injustice when he sees it and he courageously opposes those who act in unjust ways. However, he does so following the judicial procedures and customs of the societies in which he lives. He knows his rights under the legal systems of the two societies of which he is a part and he not only respects those laws but he also uses them to oppose injustice. Christians are to be well informed citizens of the kingdoms of this world and we are to work for justice in this world and against injustice according to the laws and standards of the societies in which we live.

III. Christians always aim to bear witness to Christ’s kingdom (23:1, 6-11)

While this passage shows that Paul understands that he is a citizen of both the Roman and the Jewish cultures, yet it also shows us that Paul’s ultimate allegiance is to the kingdom of God. There are a number of ways this allegiance is demonstrated in this passage. First, as we’ve noted before there are numerous similarities between Paul’s experience with the Romans and the Jews and Jesus’ experience with these same people. All the events of Jesus’ arrest and trial and torture took place in the same place that Paul’s arrest, trial and aborted torture occurred. When the Romans begin to tie up Paul to whip him, this is the same place where Jesus was whipped and mocked some 30 years prior to this. Both Paul and Jesus stand before the Sanhedrin. Both Paul and Jesus are unjustly struck in the Sanhedrin and accused of disrespecting the chief priest. Both Paul and Jesus challenge the injustice. The main differences, which show the different purposes for their arrest and trial is that Jesus was whipped but Paul escapes torture and Jesus was crucified by the Romans but Paul is rescued from death by the Romans. The similarities show that Paul is suffering for and bearing witness to the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus by his death and resurrection has overthrown all of his enemies and been appointed King by his Father. He is now waiting for that day when he will come and all the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and his Christ. But now, in this time of waiting, the servants of the king bear witness to that coming kingdom.

This is what Paul is doing in the Sanhedrin. His initial claim of innocence would have been followed by the story of his conversion and the proof that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the OT. The chief priest stopped him from going down that road and so after announcing God's judgment upon the chief priest and all those who like him, oppose Jesus by opposing his people, he announces to the Pharisees who are part of the Sanhedrin that he is a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee and that the reason he is standing as an accused criminal before them is because of the ultimate hope of Israel, which is resurrection from the dead. Paul's aim in making this announcement was to gain the support of the Pharisees, who believe in the resurrection of the dead, so that they would help him gain a hearing in this hostile crowd. It was not his intent to cause the chaotic dissension which happened. I am sure of this again, because of what Jesus tells him the next night in a vision as recorded in v. 11. He tells Paul that "just as he has born witness to Jesus in Jerusalem so he will also bear witness in Rome." Thus, Jesus himself affirms that all that Paul has done in Jerusalem, his speech before the hostile crowd and now his "trial" before the Sanhedrin, has been for the purpose of bearing witness to Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Messiah and Savior of the world.

Thus Paul's aim in appealing to the Pharisees in the audience was so that he would have the opportunity to share how the OT promised that God's Messiah would suffer and die and on the third day rise again. He aimed to explain how God's promise in the OT was to grant salvation to all who would call on his name, who would trust in his person and work, both Jew and Gentile. He wanted to tell these Jewish brothers and the Roman soldiers who were watching that all the promises that God had made to his people in the OT find their yes, their fulfillment in Jesus. He is not only the one who fulfilled all the OT types and prophetic words but he also is the one who makes all of God's promises come true. He is the son of David who will reign on David's throne over all of God's people forever. We know he is the one because of his resurrection from the dead. His resurrection assures the resurrection of all who believe in him. These are the sorts of things that Paul aimed to share with the help of the Pharisees but he was prevented from doing so by the fighting of the Sadducees and Pharisees which became so violent that the Roman tribune had to once again rescue Paul from the mad mob.

So our story ends with Jesus promising that Paul will get to do what the HS told him he was to do way back in Ephesus many months and miles ago: he will bear witness to him and his heavenly kingdom in Rome just as he has done in Jerusalem. Verse 11 is a hinge upon which the story in the book of Acts turns. This verse tells us that everything that happens to Paul after this is the working out of God's plan for his life to bring him to Rome to bear witness before the Emperor, the most powerful of earthly kings that there is one who is infinitely superior to him and a kingdom that is infinitely greater than his.

We see here that we truly are only legal immigrants in the U.S. This is not our home. This culture and this kingdom, while we live in it wisely is not our home. It is not God's will to establish the U.S.A. as the greatest and best of all societies. Our supreme allegiance isn't to this country or this culture or to our racial or ethnic or generational group. Our greatest allegiance is to the kingdom of God of which we have been made citizens not because of who we are or what we have done or decided but by the mighty work of Jesus in his dying and rising from the dead. Thus the main thing we are about as a church and as Christians is not taking over the kingdoms of this world and fixing them so we can experience heaven on earth. Rather our main thing is to bear witness by our lives and by our words to our glorious king Jesus and to his kingdom, which is not of this world but will one day come to this world. It is only on that final great and glorious day that all the kingdoms of this world will bow the knee to Jesus and will be made to conform to his wonderful kingdom. Until that day we bear witness to Jesus and his heavenly kingdom so that he might recruit more citizens to join in his kingdom through us.

© Copyright 2010 John Swanson.

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that:

- (1) you credit the author,
- (2) any modifications are clearly marked,
- (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and
- (4) you do not make more than 1,000 copies.

If you would like to post this material to the web, or if your intended use is other than outlined above, please contact River Hills Community Church, 2843 West Court Street, Janesville, WI 53548. (608) 758-0943. mail@riverhillsonline.org