

"PAUL AS DEFENDANT AND WITNESS"

(Acts 24-26)

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Looking back over the three chapters (24-26) and the three trials which they record, it seems that Luke intends to portray Paul in two guises, first and negatively as a defendant, then secondly and positively as a witness.

Paul as Defendant

Behind all three trials, as we have noted, there lies the double allegation of the Jews that Paul had spoken or acted against Moses on the one hand and against Caesar on the other. But Paul vigorously denied both charges (25:8).

Before Felix Paul rejected the charge of sectarianism, and emphasized the continuity of his gospel with the Old Testament Scriptures. He served the God of their fathers with a good conscience. He believed everything written in the law and prophets, and taught no more than they taught. He cherished a firm hope in the fulfillment of God's promises about the Messiah. Not apostasy but continuity summed up his attitude to Moses and the prophets.

Before Festus Paul rejected the charge of sedition. He had not been responsible for any breaches of the peace or of public order. So certain was he that he had done nothing against Caesar that he felt it necessary to appeal to Caesar in order to clear himself (25:8, 11). Not anarchy but loyalty summed up his attitude to Caesar.

Before Agrippa, no fresh charges were produced. Paul seems rather to have been responding to the unspoken question why the Jews were so anxious to get rid of him (25:24; 26:21). It had to do with his ministry to the Gentiles, to which however he was inescapably committed out of obedience to the vision and voice of Jesus.

Paul's three defenses were successful. Neither Felix, nor Festus, nor Agrippa found him guilty. Instead, each indicated that he was innocent of the charges made against him. Paul was not content with this, however. He went further. He proclaimed in court his threefold loyalty - to Moses and the prophets, to Caesar, and above all to Jesus Christ who met him on the Damascus road. He was a faithful Jew, a faithful Roman and a faithful Christian.

Paul as Witness

Luke's purpose in describing the three court scenes was not just apologetic, but evangelistic. He wanted his readers to remember that Paul had been commissioned to be Christ's "servant and witness" (26:16). During those two years of imprisonment, which had interrupted his missionary career, he must have felt very frustrated. But when opportunities for witness were given him, he seized them with confidence and courage. The main examples Luke gives are the private interview with Felix and the public confrontation with Agrippa. In both cases Paul was fearless.



Felix has been described as "one of the worst of Roman officials." Mention has already been made of his cruelty, lust and greed. He seems to have had no moral scruples. But Paul was not afraid of him. Since he spoke to him about righteousness, self-control and future judgment, it is reasonable to assume both that he rebuked the governor for his sins, as courageously as John the Baptist had rebuked Herod Antipas, and that he called on him to repent and believe in Jesus.

As for the trial before Agrippa, Paul was not overawed by the show of pomp and power which marked that occasion, or by the assembly of notable personages in court. "See what an audience is gathered together for Paul!" exclaimed Chrysostom. But Paul made no attempt to ingratiate himself with the authorities. He wanted the king's salvation, not his favour. So he did not stop with the story of his own conversion; he was concerned for Agrippa's conversion too. Three times, therefore, Luke has Paul repeating the elements of the gospel in the king's hearing. First, he summarized Christ's commission to him to bring people into his light, power, forgiveness and new community (18). Secondly, he described his obedience to the heavenly vision in terms of preaching that people should repent, turn to God and do good works (20). Thirdly, he detailed his continuing mission "to this very day," which was to testify that, as the Scriptures had foretold, Christ died, rose and proclaimed the dawn of the new age (23). Each time Paul thus repeated the gospel in court, he was in fact preaching it to the court. Festus might call him mad, as some had said of Jesus, but Paul knew that he was "speaking the sober truth" (25, RSV). And when the apostle finally addressed the king directly, he was confident that he not only believed the prophets (27), but was also sufficiently familiar with the facts about Jesus (26) to be persuaded of his truth.

Thank God for Paul's courage! Kings and queens, governors and generals did not daunt him. Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be "brought before kings and governors" on account of his name, and had promised that on such occasions he would give them "words and wisdom." Jesus had also told Ananias (who had presumably passed the information on) that Paul was his 'chosen instrument' to carry his name "before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (9:15). These predictions had come true, and Paul had not failed.