

- d. Paul came to Corinth with the same burden he'd carried since the day of his commissioning on the Damascus road. Corinth wasn't Jerusalem or Antioch, but neither was it identical to Athens or Gentile Philippi. Like every community, Corinth was unique and would bring its own peculiar obstacles to the gospel and the faith of its hearers. At the same time, the fundamental barrier to faith was the same at Corinth as in every place: *The Corinthians – Jew and Gentile alike – would meet the gospel with estranged minds and darkened hearts*. When it came to religious claims and their substantiation, the Jews looked for miraculous signs and the Greeks sought to apply rational wisdom. But as different as they were, both approaches have their source in minds cut off from the life of God.
- e. Consistent with his ministry elsewhere, Paul's message received a mixed response at Corinth. Luke noted that many of the Corinthians came to faith in Jesus, including the synagogue leader Crispus and his household and likely the Gentile Titius Justus (18:7-8). The gospel was continuing to bear its fruit among Jews as well as Greeks, but it was also encountering unbelief and opposition.

Corinth's numerous and obvious points of distinction afforded the natural mind much to be proud of, and Paul's gospel doubtless met with scoffing and ridicule among many of the city's residents. The dereliction of the cross hardly seemed glorious compared with the manifold human excellencies found at Corinth. The Corinthians were a proud and self-satisfied people, and deeply entrenched habits die hard. Paul's Corinthian epistles show that this native mindset continued to challenge those at Corinth who came to faith in Christ, to the point of even threatening to destroy the unity and well-being of the believing community.

The pagan Corinthian culture brought its own form of opposition to the gospel, but this paled in comparison with the fury expressed by the Jewish community – not only at Corinth, but everywhere the gospel confronted it. The reason is found in the close relation between Judaism and Christianity and the implications of the latter for Jewish identity, culture, tradition and religious belief.

- 1) First and foremost, Judaism and Christianity share the same *Scriptures*. Paul wasn't confronting the Jews with a new religion, but a new way of understanding their scriptures, and therefore a new way of understanding their own history and religious convictions and traditions.
- 2) And sharing the same Scriptures, Judaism and Christianity share the same *God* and same *salvation history*. Christianity isn't a repudiation of the Israelite salvation history and its promises and prophecies, but the fruit of them and their fulfillment.
- 3) Finally, and for the above reasons, first century Judaism shared with Christianity the same Messianic *hope* (cf. 24:10-15). The Jews were eagerly waiting for their Messiah and His kingdom; the problem was that they misconstrued both.

Thus Paul's practice was the same in every synagogue: laboring to demonstrate from the Scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised in them and in whom the sons of Israel placed their hope (18:4-5). Unlike his witness at the Areopagus, Paul testified to the Jews by reasoning with them from their own Scriptures. Rather than a new religion, Paul brought to his countrymen a new understanding of the things they already knew and believed. He longed for his Jewish brethren to come to know *in truth* the things they reverently upheld and taught – so much so that when Timothy and Silas came from Macedonia he used the support they brought (2 Corinthians 11:8-9) to devote himself entirely to his ministry to the Jews (18:5; cf. Romans 9:1-5, 10:1-2).

Paul loved his countrymen and earnestly sought their salvation, but the Lord was also revealing to him over the course of his ministry that His design in building a global Church included Jewish unbelief. God's wise and perfect will ordained that Israel should become a "vessel of wrath" whose opposition to Him and His gospel would serve the cause of His saving mercy upon "vessels of mercy" – vessels taken from among the Jews as well as the Gentiles. This purpose, declared in the Scriptures, was now being realized before Paul's eyes (Romans 9:1-33).

Paul's gospel met with some success among the Corinthian Jews, but for the most part they repudiated and opposed him. And so, as he done before at Pisidian Antioch, Paul pronounced their just condemnation and announced his decision to henceforth take the good news of Jesus to Corinth's Gentiles (18:6).

- f. Paul declared to his detractors that they had condemned themselves by their unbelief and he left no doubt as to what that meant: *God was rejecting them*, which Paul symbolized by shaking out his garments before them. This affront was sufficient in itself to provoke the Jews' ire, but when Paul continued his ministry in the house right next to the synagogue he pushed them to the limit. It was bad enough that he had dared to condemn them in favor of the Gentiles; now he was intentionally rubbing their noses in it by subjecting them to a constant reminder.

The Jews' indignation intensified day-by-day until they could take it no longer. The fierceness and intimidating power of what was coming is highlighted by Jesus' appearance to Paul. So grave was the threat and so important the mission at Corinth that the Lord came to Paul in a vision to encourage him to persevere in his ministry undaunted and with all boldness (18:9-10).

- g. When their offense finally reached the boiling point the Jews of the Corinthian synagogue rose up together against Paul and dragged him before Gallio, the Roman proconsul. The marrow of their charge was that Paul was persuading men to worship the God of Israel contrary to the law (18:12-13). Some commentators believe that the Jews were speaking of *Roman* law, in which case their charge was either that Paul was guilty of undermining Roman law (cf. 16:19-21) or, more likely, that this "Way" Paul was promoting isn't a sect of Judaism and therefore shouldn't be afforded the religious privileges granted to Jews under Roman law.

However, Luke's account of the proconsul's response indicates that he intended his readers to understand the Jews' accusation in terms of *Jewish* law – in context, “law” probably in the broadest sense of the entire Old Testament scriptures rather than the Law of Moses. But whether taken narrowly or broadly, the charge shows that the Jews believed that Paul was promoting a way of relating to God that is contrary to the scriptural revelation and prescription.

This is not the first time Luke records a charge of this sort being leveled against a believer in Jesus, but it's the first time (though not the last) it was leveled at Paul. Previously, Jews in Jerusalem had charged Stephen with speaking against the Law of Moses (6:9-14) – an accusation to which the Pharisee Saul may well have lent his voice. Now, all these years later, Paul, the Lord's apostle, was facing a similar accusation. There are, however, a few notable differences:

- First, Stephen was charged with speaking against Moses and God Himself by proclaiming the end of Old Covenant Judaism (6:14), whereas Paul was accused of inciting Jews and proselytes to worship God in a manner contrary to His scriptural prescription. These accusations had a different emphasis, but both emerged from the same Judaistic perspective.
- Secondly, the charges against Stephen were set in an entirely Jewish context. They were brought by Jews, but to the Sanhedrin – the Jewish high court seated in Jerusalem itself. In Paul's case, the Corinthians Jews leveled their charges before the Gentile civil authority, specifically, the Roman proconsul appointed to administer Rome's rule in that region. As with Stephen's accusers, this group of Jews fully expected their charges to be adjudicated to their satisfaction, but that wasn't to be the case.
- Finally, these two situations differed in that the charges against Stephen had been trumped up (ref. 6:11, 13). His opponents intended to present their accusations before the Sanhedrin, and they knew that, in that setting, the most effective way to silence Stephen was to have him convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death. But in Paul's case it appears that his accusers sincerely believed the truthfulness of what they were charging him with. They had heard his teaching for many months – not only indirectly through witnesses, but by his own mouth during the time he was proclaiming Jesus and His gospel in their synagogue (18:4-5).

Three inferences follow from this latter observation, one of which must necessarily be true: The first is that these Jews were correct in their assessment; intentionally or not, Paul was deceiving men into worshipping God contrary to His law. The second is that they had actually misjudged Paul's teaching. He wasn't at all leading men away from God's revealed truth (even as set forth in the Law of Moses); the problem was that the Jews misunderstood his words. The third option is that the Jews understood Paul correctly, but misunderstood their own Scriptures, including the Law of Moses.

Taken alone, this passage doesn't provide the answer as to which of these options is the correct one. But the larger biblical context points clearly toward the third one. What Paul was experiencing had been first experienced by the Lord Himself. Jesus' Jewish adversaries had understood exactly what He was saying as well as the implications for themselves and their doctrine. It wasn't that His teaching was unclear; *it was that it confronted and challenged their own convictions* (cf. Matthew 15:1-14, 21:23-46 with John 8:12-59, 10:22-25, 15:20-25; etc.).

The Jews of that time had a deeply entrenched, traditional understanding of the Scriptures – particularly as they address the issue of the kingdom of God, the messianic king and Israel's place in that kingdom. They envisioned the promised kingdom in terms of the restoration of David's kingdom with all its earthly power and glory. David's son would secure this kingdom by overthrowing Israel's subjugators and re-establishing the sovereign independence and power of the Israelite theocracy. Through His messianic king, Yahweh was going to liberate and exalt Abraham's children, giving them a place of preeminent power and glory among the nations of the earth.

Jewish eschatology of that day focused on a coming Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom, but this meant to the Jews their vindication and exaltation, not their judgment. They were awaiting a liberating king whose presence and work would reassert to the world their unique and privileged status as God's people; they anticipated a deliverer who would live to vindicate their righteousness, not die as an act of judgment against them. As it had been with Jesus, so it was now with Paul: The Jews were rejecting their Messiah and His gospel, not because they hadn't heard or didn't understand, but because they were firmly committed to establishing their own righteousness. *They were stumbling over the stumbling stone* (cf. Romans 9:30-10:4 with Isaiah 8:9-15).

Again, this unbelief was the Jews' own doing, and yet it was equally a matter of divine determination. Following upon a prelude citing the full culpability of His vineyard (Isaiah 5:1ff), Yahweh commissioned His prophet to go to the sons of Israel and proclaim to them His judicial condemnation: They who had refused for so long to see, hear, listen and obey were henceforth to be consigned to their unbelief and destroyed in it (cf. Isaiah 6:1-13 with 28:1-13; cf. also Jeremiah 7:1ff, 25:1ff). This judgment found immediate fulfillment in the captivities of both houses of Israel, with only a remnant of Judah later returning from its exile.

God had raised up Isaiah to pronounce His judgment upon the unbelieving covenant nation and its imminent desolation and destruction. The sons of Israel were to remain under God's just sentence of judicial hardening until the "cities were devastated and without inhabitant" and "the land was utterly desolate." And yet the New Testament affirms that that sentence wasn't lifted with the Judean restoration. Israel yet continues under the judgment of having eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear (ref. Matthew 13:10-15; Mark 4:10-13; Luke 8:1-10; John 12:37-41; Acts 28:23-27; cf. also Mark 6:45-52 with 8:14-21).

Israel continues under God's sentence, but for the sake of His saving purpose in the world. In fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures, Israel's national unbelief serves the salvation of the Gentiles together with a remnant of Jews. The covenant nation is fully culpable for its rejection of its Messiah and God isn't leaving it unpunished. And yet that opposition and just judgment serve His predetermined, good and glorious end. Paul may not have understood this dynamic at the outset of his gospel ministry, but he certainly did by the time he penned the epistle to the Romans on his third missionary journey (circa 57 A.D.)

- h. This group of Jews dragged Paul before the Roman proconsul expecting him to rule in their favor. Luke previously recounted Jewish success in employing the civil authority against Christ's witnesses (ref. 14:1-6, 17:1-9), but here for the first time he records a different outcome. The Jews at Corinth were unable to prevail against Paul, not because the Corinthian proconsul was a better or wiser ruler, but because they adopted the wrong approach.

At Thessalonica and Berea the Jews managed to create a situation of civil unrest, and that had left the authorities no choice but to act in accord with their wishes. But here the proconsul was confronted only with accusations related to the Jewish religion and so he sent the Jews away unrequited – probably with a stern rebuke for wasting his time with foolish and irrelevant concerns (18:14-16).

- i. Unable to prevail with Corinth's civil authority, these Jews determined to take matters into their own hands. Gallio may have regarded their concerns as trivial, but they didn't share his estimate. If he wouldn't give them justice, they'd exact it themselves. Thus the preferred reading – the one that the context best supports – has the Jews (not a Gentile mob, as indicated by some Greek manuscripts) seizing and beating Sosthenes, the synagogue leader at that time and a Jew who had evidently come to faith in Christ through Paul's ministry (ref. 1 Corinthians 1:1).

How the mob ended up back at the judgment seat in Gallio's presence isn't clear, but Luke's account does emphasize that the proconsul's refusal to act against Paul wasn't due to a judicious conscience and the recognition that the apostle had done nothing wrong. He didn't get involved because the whole matter was of no concern to him (18:17). The Jews discerned Gallio's indifference and this clearly was a factor in their actions. *If Gallio was unwilling to act on their behalf, they would instead achieve their ends through his inaction.*

By dragging Sosthenes before the judgment seat and beating him there before a crowd of onlookers they could create the impression that they were concerned with due process and the rule of law. They might also have believed that taking this severe action under the approving gaze of the proconsul would assist their goal of persuading the Corinthian populace that it was unwise and even dangerous to become entangled with this "Way." Whatever their exact thinking in the matter, it's obvious that these Jews wouldn't have taken this brazen step unless they were confident that Gallio and his officers wouldn't interfere with them.