



The Gospel to Mars Hill NOT Mars Hill into the Church

By Bob DeWaay

Over the years I have pondered a contradiction in the life of Paul. In the book of Galatians, Paul strongly denounced any compromise with Judaizers (those who claimed Christians must keep Jewish laws like circumcision and food laws). He even rebuked Peter for compromising on this matter (**Galatians 2:14**). Yet according to **Acts 21:23 – 26**, Paul went through a Jewish rite of purification and entered the temple where sacrifices were offered for him and his companions. Such behavior apparently contradicts what Paul taught in Galatians.

But Paul's foremost concern was the gospel. Paul had been warned that if he went to Jerusalem he would be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles (**Acts 21:11**). When the disciples tried to prevent his going he said this: "*What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus*" (**Acts 21:13**). Paul's purpose for going was "*the name of the Lord Jesus*" which signifies His person and work, i.e. the gospel. Paul's enemies pressed charges against him stating that he was seeking to persuade Jews to forsake Moses and not circumcise their children (**Acts 21:21**). Later Claudius Lysias told Felix that the Jews were accusing Paul over questions about their law (**Acts 23:28, 29**).

So to forestall that issue and focus back on the gospel itself, Paul followed the advice he was given: he took a Nazirite vow and went through purification. He also did this to reassure the Jewish believers that his mission to the Gentiles did not mean he forbade Jews from keeping their customs if they saw fit. What Paul anathematized was the teaching that all Christians, Jew or Gentile, must practice the stipulations of the Mosaic Law to be right with God. Accordingly, circumcision was a matter of Christian liberty; the Jews were free to practice it as they saw fit. Paul was not forcing Jews to give up circumcision by divine command, but making it a matter of liberty.

Paul explained his practice: "*And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law*" (**1Corinthians 9:20**). Paul was not obligated by Christian duty to keep all the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant. But

his total commitment to preaching the gospel to all compelled him to come to Jerusalem “as a Jew.” This same principle can be seen in his earlier missionary practices when Paul continually entered synagogues in various cities. For example: “*Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ’*” (**Acts 17:1-3**). By preaching in the synagogue Paul was not implying that one finds salvation through the traditions of the synagogue. Nor was he implying that what was typically taught in the synagogue is what people should believe. He went there to preach the gospel to them from their own Scriptures.

In the same chapter of Acts, Paul visited Mars Hill and preached to Greek philosophers according to their manner of discourse. But he preached Christ and the resurrection (**Acts 17:18; 30, 31**). Earlier I cited **1Corinthians 9:20** about Paul becoming “as a Jew.” Here is the rest of his statement: “*to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it*” (**1Corinthians 9:21-23**). What he did on Mars Hill illustrates what Paul meant by that. In the synagogue he reasoned from scriptures, on Mars Hill he debated ideas about the nature of God and proclaimed that Christ had been raised from the dead so they were accountable to repent.

The error that many people make, especially those in the Purpose Driven and Emergent movements, is that they take Paul’s practices and teachings employed in the public arena to preach the gospel and apply them to the church. Many times have I heard **1Corinthians 9:20-23** cited to justify changing the church to make it attractive to the world. This is a category error.

Let us consider Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders. He recounted to them how he had preached the gospel: “*solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*” (**Acts 20:21**). God used Paul’s preaching to establish a church in Ephesus. He also described his teaching in that church:

“Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose [KJV “counsel”] of God” (Acts 20:26, 27). Paul’s charge to these elders reveals the need to carefully guard the well being of the flock: *“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28 – 30).*

Outside of the church, in the public arena, Paul became all things to all men, i.e. he was willing to go into their arena and speak the gospel to them according to their customs of public discourse. Inside the church, Paul taught that elders are to carefully guard the flock and make sure they are not harmed by wolves. The church is to be a safe place where God’s flock is fed the pure word of God. As Paul departed he said, *“And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).* Nothing is to be taught in the church that is not according to the whole counsel of God and also summarized as *“the word of His grace.”* The sensibilities of Jews or Greeks outside the church cannot determine what is taught inside the church.

Let us now consider Paul’s stern rebuke of the Judiazers in Galatia in this light. There were those who wanted to attack Christian liberty by requiring circumcision: *“But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you” (Galatians 2:3 – 5).* Paul guarded the truth of the gospel and would not tolerate false teaching or practice in the church.

Further evidence for Paul’s distinction between what might need to be done outside the church for the sake of the gospel and what could not be tolerated as a legal requirement inside the church is seen in his dealings with Timothy: *“Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3).* So on one

hand, inside the church, Paul would not tolerate a demand that Titus be circumcised. But on the other, outside the church for the sake of the gospel going to the Jews, Timothy was circumcised.

There have been those who resolved this apparent conflict by claiming Paul was being inconsistent in Acts 16 and Acts 21 and was guilty of hypocrisy. After all, Paul is not infallible. However, we have to consider authorial intent. Did Luke, as the Holy Spirit inspired author of Acts, give any contextual hints or evidence that his readers were to understand that Paul was being hypocritical and downright in error? The answer is “no.” Paul’s journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem, through various courts and trials, then by ship and on to Rome is portrayed by Luke as that of a great man of God forthrightly testifying of the gospel everywhere he went. Luke gives no hint that we are to see Paul as a hypocrite. Elsewhere in Acts when someone’s motives were wrong, they were rebuked (like Simon Magus in Acts 8). Luke intends for us to see Paul in a positive light.

I conclude therefore that outside the church we are to take the gospel to any venue that arises and boldly proclaim it. That others (like the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill) use the same forum to debate ideas does not sully the gospel preacher who goes there. We are also to avoid needless offense to people outside the church. But inside the church, we must carefully maintain purity of teaching. The church is not a venue for Judiazers, philosophers, and false teachers.

We can fall into error in two ways. One is to turn the church itself into “Mars Hill.” No, the church is not a forum for hearing diverse ideas and human wisdom; it is to be fed nothing but the pure word of God. The other error is to so isolate ourselves (for whatever reason) that we fail to go out into the arena of public debate and proclaim the gospel. The church is not to be a cloistered community. When the medieval church created cloistered communities (monasteries) the results were neither purity in the church (they fell into mysticism) nor evangelism outside.

The pattern revealed in the New Testament must be followed. We live in a day in which the biggest threat is the world coming into the church. This we must fight. But in the fight, let us not fail to simultaneously go forth into the arena of public debate and proclaim the gospel. This approach will be honoring to God.

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