

Dig, Acts 21
December 16, 2009

Paul’s lingering departure from the Ephesian elders that he had called to Miletus was full of mutual affection that had developed over the years he had visited Ephesus. He would not be back. He had played a major role in building, nourishing and guiding them and other assemblies among the Gentiles both in Asia (minor) and Europe. He recognizes there would be many more challenges for them to face. But, remarkably, he did not appoint a successor. He simply commended them to God and to the word of His grace which was able to build them up and to give them an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. Neither Paul nor Peter nor John nor any other apostle appointed a successor. Nor did Christ give authority to the local assemblies or local elders anywhere to appoint an authoritative leader, elder or overseer (bishop) over any local assembly nor over all assemblies in a region. Successors after the apostles departed to be with the Lord would not be needed. What had changed? The completion of the New Testament. It was well under way. Paul would be instrumental in completing it, though imprisoned. Faithful, reliable brethren like Timothy would remain to take custody of the manuscripts and see to the reproduction and distribution of accurate copies, 2Timothy ____ .

While no apostolic succession was established, were the assemblies and saints left alone in the wilderness with neither shepherds nor food to fend for themselves? No, the elders of Ephesus and of each other local assembly were given the care. The responsibilities and qualifications of these brothers was also marked out in Paul’s letters to Timothy, Titus and Peter’s general epistle. Paul carefully marked out the policy that governed his own life as he labored among them. What a weighty example for them and us. The elders and others who sought spiritual oversight or leadership were not to be salaried. Paul wasn’t. There is no hint of a salaried career as a professional churchman.

33 I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. 34 Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. 35 I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

He was the model. Heed his example. Don’t seek to override it.

Paul still wanted to go to Rome and that on his way to Spain, Romans 1 & 15. But he set out for Jerusalem first. Luke describes the means, the route and stops but gives few details of events along the way. Except wherever he went he was repeatedly warned by godly brothers of danger ahead and the Spirit actually forbid his going. But he went anyway. His motives were pure and good by any standard. He is blessed by fellowship with earnest Christians all along the way, many the fruit of his own

labors over the years. How encouraging. And these very ones were so faithful to their Lord they obeyed the prompting of the Holy Spirit in warning the great apostle, their father in the faith, against doing what he had decided to do. They weren’t intimidated but when they realized further protest would be futile they wisely and faithfully left him to the Lord. Notice, no assembly discipline was suggested. The personal movements of any of the Lord’s servants are not subject to the direction of the assembly, nor to any “board.” The servant is responsible to his own master, Romans 14:4. Fellow believers may support his work or decline to. They may offer advice and even prophesy the Lord’s will. But we are not to attempt to direct or govern any believer seeking to serve the Lord. The authority of the assembly regarding an individual extends only to sinful behavior, as in 1Corinthians 5 and then without punitive action. (One of John’s letters, 3 John, documents a serious crisis where both an individual brother and the local assembly exceeded scriptural authority.) As others along Paul’s way before them, the brethren in Caesarea knew their limits. They fell back on the Lord and did not go beyond that saying

“The will of the Lord be done.”

And it was. The rest of Acts describes what then happened and how the Lord graciously worked all things together for good, even when our own chosen path is not His preferred path. How good He is!

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

And in none of this was Paul’s testimony and message regarding Christ discredited by his decisions.

But dangerous and fearful things happened to Paul. His dearest desire—for the Jews to be turned nationally to Christ though his preaching—was not realized. His own Christian brethren in Jerusalem apparently had not quite let go of their Judaistic heritage. Nor were they ready to endure suffering for such a stand. They innocently coached Paul to participate in some Jewish ceremony. Paul speaks of a reason for this response in 1Corinthians 9:20. Doing so in the liberty of grace, inadvertently nearly destroyed his own testimony of the grace of God to the Jews. Why? Because God had warned him it was not His will then.

The volatile, zealous Jews (Saul had been one once) rioted on a mistaken assumption about him. He was quickly arrested (which saved his life) and put in chains by the Roman occupation forces. He then suffered years of repeated rejection, injustice, insult, continuing frustration and hardships. Some dare to criticize him for his “failure” in returning to Jerusalem. While we should learn from his mistakes, we could learn more from his zeal and love for the Lord and for lost sinners. Could the Lord find reason to rebuke us as he did Job’s friends? (Job 42:7 - 10.) In a

different setting, Shem and Japheth respectfully dealt with their father's disgrace, Genesis 9:11.

I highly recommend "Synopsis of the Bible" by J. N Darby. His gentle take on Chapters 20 - 22 is graciously sensitive to Paul's strong love and feelings and his zeal. It's a good read. JND's attitude is a good example for us as we come upon similar situations.

Paul was never as sensitive about the Jews regard for their law as he was about Gentile believers taking it up, Galatians 1. Yet we wonder what James and his companions were thinking there in Jerusalem when Paul arrived. He apparently brought an offering of the Gentile assemblies to the poor saints at Jerusalem. His efforts to coordinate this extraordinary act of grace are described in various epistles, 1Corinthians 16:2; 2Corinthians 8:4,6,19; Corinthians 8 & 9, Romans 15:26-28. The delivery and reception are mentioned in Acts 19:21; 20:22; 24:17. Was there no gratitude expressed?

Over 30 years after that first Pentecost following the Lord's resurrection they had not quite let go of the religious

trappings of their Jewish heritage. Peter wrote to the scattered of Israel about it. The letter to the Hebrews (probably written by Paul himself) was God's final notice to them. The city and the temple and its ceremonial trappings which they were still meddling with was soon to be leveled to the ground. The Lord Himself had predicted this, Luke 21:5,6. Weren't they listening? Yet even Gentile Christians soon drifted toward the Jewish law and practices. These appealed to the flesh not the Spirit. Still do. How many today live for Christ in heaven? How many are spreading the gospel of Christ? How many are attempting to preserve the earth and the world system which is doomed? How many practice a worldly religion that gratifies the flesh? How many believers have reverted to rituals like those from which Lord's death and resurrection had freed the Jewish disciples? Where are we? You?

By Ronald Canner, December 16, 2009