

Laughing off the Gospel

For: Voice of the Church

By: Rev. Clarence J. VanderVelde

The Apostle Paul had been appointed by Christ to proclaim Christ's Name to Gentiles and kings (Acts 9:15). Even before kings! And that's what we see Paul doing in Acts 26 when he proclaimed the gospel to King Agrippa. Paul had been in prison for some time (Acts 24:27), and then he was brought before King Agrippa.

Herod Agrippa II was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, who had lived at the time of Christ's birth and had tried to wipe out the baby boys in Bethlehem. Agrippa's great-grandmother had been Jewish, and Agrippa's family had a long-standing ruling position in the area – all with the result that Agrippa knew about Jewish customs and beliefs.

It's an intriguing account because it can teach us something about apologetics. The term "apologetics" shouldn't be understood in the sense of being apologetic or sorry about something, but rather it is the field of theological study which deals with the defence of the Christian faith and how to present the gospel to unbelievers. In fact, when Acts 26:24 tells us that Paul "...was saying these things in his defense..." (ESV), it uses a Greek word from which the term "apologetics" is derived.

So, what can we learn from Paul's interaction with King Agrippa about reaching out to others with the gospel? Acts 26 shows us Paul's appeal to Agrippa, Agrippa's evasion of Paul's appeal, and Paul's response to Agrippa's evasion.

Paul first recounted his own life's story and how the Lord had reached into his life and brought him to the light of the gospel. Paul had been a persecutor of the church, but Jesus Christ had taken hold of Paul as Paul was on the way to arresting more Christians and Christ had turned Paul into an ambassador of the gospel.

That's the first thing we can learn from Paul's presentation of the gospel to King Agrippa. Each Christian has a life story too, and some of these stories can be powerful testimonies to God's grace in our lives. In reaching out to others with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it can sometimes be very helpful and encouraging for others to hear our own personal story as to how God reached into our lives and brought us from darkness to light – as long as the focus is not on us but on Christ and how Christ has drawn us to himself.

Paul explained to King Agrippa that there was no reason for his imprisonment because he was simply proclaiming what the gospel said! The Jews should not have tried to kill Paul (Acts 21:30,31). Paul said, "...I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass..." (Acts 26:22). Paul's point was that the Old Testament promises and Scriptures were fulfilled in Christ! God's own people – the Jews – should have recognized this! And this, of course, is always the key thing in the presentation of the gospel to anyone. We learn that too from Paul's encounter with Agrippa. We show from Scripture how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the gospel promises.

As Paul went on to say, the prophets and Moses had said "...that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:23). For example, Isaiah had prophesied in Isaiah 53 about the suffering Servant who would suffer to pay for our sins. David had spoken in Psalm 16 about not being abandoned to Sheol (Ps 16:10). The Old Testament is full of such prophecies! And all of this was fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This gospel of the crucified and resurrected Christ would come to Jews and Gentiles!

Paul proclaimed this to Agrippa as the gospel of *light*. It's the gospel of light because it's the gospel of *life*. The Bible tells us that some others had been raised to life, but Christ was the first to rise from the dead never to die again. And Christ's resurrection offers hope to every believer because it is the guarantee of our resurrection and eternal life. For every believer, the darkness of death is dispelled by the light of the gospel of life.

This is the gospel which Paul was called to proclaim even to kings. This is the gospel which Paul proclaimed with the call to faith and repentance for everyone who heard it (Acts 26:20). Only by way of faith is there forgiveness and salvation, life and light, for people. The defence of the gospel always leads to the call to believe the gospel. We learn that too from what Paul said in Acts 26.

Then Paul came to the climax of his appeal: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets" (Acts 26:27)? The governor who was also in attendance had loudly announced his rejection of the gospel when he said, "Paul, you are out of your mind..." (Acts 26:24). Paul responded that he wasn't out of his mind. The governor had interrupted Paul. Then Paul turned to Agrippa and asked as it were, "And you...King Agrippa? I am really speaking to you...Do you believe the prophets?"

We learn something important from this too for our outreach efforts. Notice how *personal* the address is. Paul rivetted the attention on Agrippa by using his name. In fact, we find this throughout Acts 26; Paul repeatedly uses Agrippa's name or title of king. Paul is very *direct*. It's like when we use someone's name in conversation at key points when speaking with that person in order to impress the point on them. We can do that in our outreach efforts too in order to be personal and direct. The fact is that we will all have to answer personally to God one day when we stand before him. So, today the gospel comes to us very personally and directly like this: "John, Mary – or whatever our name is – do you believe the gospel of Jesus Christ?"

At that point, King Agrippa hesitated. Agrippa knew the Jewish faith and believed it at a certain level. And Agrippa knew about Christ because, as Paul said, the events of Christ's life and ministry had not been done in a corner (Acts 26:3,26). But Agrippa hesitated in answering because to deny that he believed the prophets would upset the Jews, and to admit that he believed the prophets would imply from Paul's perspective that Agrippa should accept Christ. Therefore, Paul helped Agrippa along: "I know that you believe" (Acts 26:27).

But this was too much for King Agrippa. You see him squirming. All eyes were on Agrippa. This was a decisive moment in Agrippa's life because he was being confronted with the gospel. Would he accept it or reject it? Many other people have felt the heat of such a moment. And many have squirmed. It made them uncomfortable. They wanted to get away from it.

Agrippa chose an evasion tactic. We read: “And Agrippa said to Paul, ‘In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?’” (Acts 26:28)? Agrippa tried to break the seriousness of the moment with humour and sarcasm. Isn’t this tactic of evasion employed by many? Maybe that has been your reaction too.

So that was it. Paul’s serious effort at proclaiming the gospel to King Agrippa was rebuffed. It was laughed off. End of discussion. Paul knew that it was over. Paul ended his defence of the gospel with a wish or prayer: “And Paul said, ‘Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am – except for these chains’” (Acts 26:29). We can learn from this that we have to know when to stop in our evangelistic outreach. Paul knew. Trivialization by way of humour marks the end.

But note that Paul sincerely wished that all who heard him that day would be converted! It pained Paul that the gospel received this reaction, and it was his prayer that things would be different. Do those of us who are Christians have that same sincere desire? Does it pain us that people laugh off the gospel? Do we pray that things would be different? We can learn this from Paul too.

Agrippa is gone. Paul is gone. But the gospel remains. And the church remains. May the church continue to be faithful in bringing the gospel to small and great, people of ordinary status and people of high status. I would like to say to every one of you listening today: If you aren’t a believer, please take the appeal of the gospel to heart and don’t evade it. Believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour. For, the gospel is the gospel of eternal salvation!
