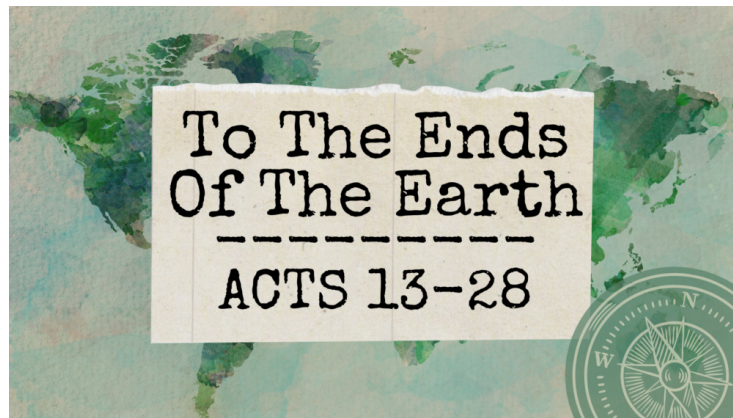


# Paul: Right or Wrong



**Acts 21:1–40**

**Bro Ricky Cunningham**

One of the things that I love about the Bible is its integrity. I love its honesty. I love its transparency. There are just some things that I think would have been left out if the Holy Spirit hadn't been leading those guys to say what they said when they wrote the Word of God. For example, Noah—he is a righteous man in a time when the majority of the people on earth were not righteous. He preaches one hundred and twenty years about a flood that finally comes. Through that water and by that boat, he saves his family. Glory Hallelujah! And then he gets drunk. Are you kidding me? Then there is Samson—strong enough to withstand the whole Philistine army, and then he is weak when it comes to a woman. There is David—standing in front of a giant with a slingshot, and in the name of the Lord, he brings Goliath down. Years later, he will bring his family down because he cannot stand against Bathsheba.

Now, I want to be honest with you. There are some people that I so put on a pedestal, that I am just not sure they could really do any wrong. Do you have people like that? One of the guys that I just struggled to believe could

do wrong is this guy named Paul, who we have been studying about throughout the book of Acts. This morning, we are going to read Acts chapter 21. If you follow along with our daily devotions, you should have already read all of Acts 21. If you have, then you understand the reason why I am going to title this sermon – *Paul: Right or Wrong*. When I read this passage, I asked myself if Luke is saying Paul was in the right, or if Luke was trying to tell us Paul was in the wrong. I spent all week studying, and I really think the title of the message should have been – *Paul: Right or Wrong (Bro Ricky isn't sure)*. You don't hear me say that very often. As we walk through this chapter, I hope you sense my dilemma as I try to preach what Luke is saying to us from this chapter about the great Apostle Paul. We are going to be looking at the entire chapter, but our Scripture text will be verses 7–14 to give us the context.

## **Scripture**

***"When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"*** When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

## **The Warning from the Church in Tyre**

When Acts 21 opens, Paul is finishing his third missionary journey. He is leaving the elders from the church at Ephesus whom he met with in Miletus. In these first six verses, Luke records that they leave Miletus, stop at Cos for a day, then they go to Rhodes for a day, and then he names other places they go. They are in what is called a coastal sailing vessel where they are just sailing down the coast, not getting very far out in the sea. They arrive each morning at a new port, and stay about a day. They have about four hundred miles to travel because Paul wants to be at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost for the Jewish festival, so they now board a sea-going vessel. On this journey, Luke describes the islands that they see and then they finally arrive at Tyre where the ship's cargo will be unloaded, and that they are going to be there for seven days. Now, probably what Luke is hinting at is that it is going to take about seven days to get all that cargo off that ship, load the new cargo, and then load the passengers and continue on the journey, so they will be in Tyre seven days. Then, verse 4 tells us that while they are there, Paul, Luke, and their companions seek out disciples. They are trying to find out if there is a church there, and sure enough, there is a church there. According to Luke, the Holy Spirit has spoken to this church and they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Look what the wording is, "And through the Spirit they were telling Paul..." Now, the ESV in English kind of smooths this out. In the Greek, they say, 'stop going to Jerusalem.' They are emphatic—they are to the point, because they are under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit.

## **Paul's Dilemma**

I have a question for you. We know that Paul goes to Jerusalem. So, if the church is telling Paul under the leadership of the Holy Spirit not to go and he goes, then it seems like he is wrong to go, agreed? Then what is the problem? Well, we are not just opening Acts 21; we have been building week after week after week. We know from Acts 19:21 Luke recorded that while Paul was at Ephesus he resolved in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, and then to Rome. Now, back when we were reading Acts chapter 19 and I saw the great Apostle Paul resolving under the leadership of the Holy Spirit

to go to Jerusalem, I just assumed he had got the green light to go to Jerusalem. Didn't you have that thought? To reinforce this, last week in Acts chapter 20, Paul gathered all those Ephesian elders together at Miletus and before he gave them their responsibility, when he was talking about himself in verses 22–23 he made this comment, "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." Just reading that, it sounded like Paul was constrained, controlled by the Spirit, and he said he was going to Jerusalem. He didn't really know what was going to happen except the Holy Spirit had told him some really bad things would happen to him when he got there. But Paul is used to that. Bad things happen everywhere he goes. So, I just thought it was the will of God for Paul to go to Jerusalem. I have this question—if Paul has resolved in the Spirit to go, and the Spirit is constraining him, telling him what is going to happen when he gets there, why does the same Spirit now tell the church to tell him to stop? Do you see the dilemma? Based on Acts chapter 21, is it possible that Paul (as he did all decisions) consulted with the Holy Spirit, resolved in the Spirit, and took what the Holy Spirit said into consideration, but made a decision to go to Jerusalem? In Acts chapter 20, is it possible that when it says Paul is constrained by the Spirit that the Spirit is constraining him, binding him, trying to get him to change his mind and telling him if he goes there, here is what is going to happen? If you have ever run into anybody that is headstrong, you know they just keep going. For seven days, Paul is in a church at Tyre and the Holy Spirit has already told the church the message. See, Paul always showed up at a church and thought he had a message for the church, but this church has a message for him, and the message is stop doing what you are doing—don't go to Jerusalem. Does anybody believe he listened? He didn't listen. As a matter of fact, this passage says that he got ready to board the ship and the church there was so concerned that the whole family showed up, even the kids. We hadn't seen that expression yet. They are watching the great Apostle Paul do what the Holy Spirit has told them he shouldn't be doing, and he goes anyway.

Paul gets to Caesarea, and Luke immediately tells us that he goes into the house of Philip, the evangelist, one of the seven. We remember him from Acts chapter 6. There was a dispute in the church between the Hellenistic widows and the Hebrew widows because of the daily distribution of bread. Those who spoke Greek felt like they were being left out and the apostles set aside seven men—we call them deacons—to take care of those widows' needs. Here in chapter 21, we see Philip again. He is not in Jerusalem; he is now in Caesarea. He has a wife, and four daughters who are not married, and Luke tells us that those four unmarried daughters prophesied. Now, this bothers a lot of evangelical conservative churches who believe that right is only to men. Now, we don't hear a prophecy from the four daughters, so why does Luke throw that in there? Here is what we are told—the Holy Spirit has just told the whole church to tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and now when he gets to Caesarea, the first house he goes into there are four ladies who can discern God's will. They can prophesy. What Luke is trying to do is to tie this back to the age in which we are living. In Acts chapter 2, Peter said that what happened on the day of Pentecost—the coming of the Holy Spirit—fulfills what was spoken to Joel about how we would know when we enter the last days. We will know when we enter the last days when the Holy Spirit would not just fall upon the priest, not just the prophet, and not just the king as He did in the Old Testament, but He will fall upon all Christians, and all Christians will have a gift, and even your young women will have the gift to prophesy. We are in the last age, the last days.

### **Agabus' Prophecy**

But then, something happens. Philip's daughters don't prophesy, but all of a sudden, Agabus shows up. Now remember, we met him in Acts chapter 11. He showed up and prophesied about the famine that was going to come upon the city of Jerusalem and the countryside, to prepare the church to help. Now he comes from Judea to Caesarea. He goes into the house of Philip, and as a prophet, he takes the belt off of Paul. Now, it wasn't a belt like mine that has five holes, goes around your body once, and you put the prong in one of the holes and fasten the buckle. The belt that Paul had was a belt that went around his robe and his body several

times and it was tied. Agabus takes Paul's belt off of him and then he is going to give a symbolic gesture. He is going to illustrate what is going to happen to Paul. This happened in the Old Testament many times. A prophet would show up and to make sure that people heard the message they would visualize it. Do you remember Ezekiel? The children of Israel just couldn't believe that their city was going to be destroyed. So, one day Ezekiel started playing with mud in the street. He started making this mud city and started besieging the city. He had to lay on his side for so many days this way, and he had to lay on his other side so many days that way. He was just playing in the dirt, so to speak. Do you remember Jeremiah? He showed up one day to the nation of Israel and had a yoke on his neck, saying to the nations around that if they didn't repent, this is what is going to happen to them—Nebuchadnezzar would come down and put a yoke on their neck. It would be one thing to be those guys, but can you imagine being Isaiah? Just so Israel understands how bad it's going to get, God said if they don't listen to me, take off all of your clothes, and walk through the countryside naked. I am sorry, but I just have to draw the line right there, amen? Can you imagine that picture? Here in Acts 21, Luke tells us that Agabus, in Old Testament flare, takes that belt off Paul and he binds his *own* hands and feet. He doesn't bind Paul's hands and feet; he binds his own. Then, he announces, "Thus, says the Holy Spirit..." Then he says the man who goes into Jerusalem wearing this belt, this is what will happen to him. When the church and the companions of Paul and Luke hear this—even Luke joins in—they get in Paul's face and they say don't go to Jerusalem! And Paul said, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?" He said I am willing to go to Jerusalem and be in prison; I am even willing to die in Jerusalem for the name of Jesus! Luke records that when they heard him be this strong and they couldn't persuade him to change his mind, they backed off and just said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Did you notice what I noticed? Is the Holy Spirit trying to tell Luke something here? Now, I just want you to know this as your pastor...I don't ever like to be out on a limb, so after I study and come up with what I believe Scripture says, I search, look, and read the thoughts of some of the scholars and pastors I respect. They are just pretty well evenly divided, but

I couldn't find any of them touching this thought. See, I would have expected Agabus to take off Paul's belt and bind Paul's hands and feet and tell him that is what would happen to him if he showed up in Jerusalem, but he didn't do that. He took Paul's belt off of him and then tied his own hands and feet. I have nobody back me up, but I have this thought...I am out on a limb. Is it possible that the Holy Spirit is trying to tell Paul that if you go to Jerusalem, it's not going to be the Jews who are doing this to you, it's going to be you bringing this on yourself because I don't want you to go there, but he goes anyway? Is he supposed to go? I don't know. I am leaning towards he should not have gone, but he does it anyway. Have you ever been there? You prayed over something, sought the Holy Spirit on something, but you had such a desire in your heart to do what you wanted to do that even though the Holy Spirit was warning you, you did it anyway. I love the honesty of Scripture. I love the transparency of Scripture. I love the integrity of Scripture. See, Paul is that guy that I want to put upon the mantle and think he could not have done wrong. But it is very possible here that he brought what is getting ready to happen on himself, because the man who expected the church to listen to him wouldn't listen to the church when the Holy Spirit was speaking through the church.

The next thing we know, Paul is in Jerusalem and he gets a great reception. Now, we don't see it here, but remember he has been collecting this love offering from the Gentile churches to take to Jerusalem. A little bit later on, he is going to talk about that but he didn't talk about it here. Here, he meets James and the elders of the church, not the whole church, just James and the elders. James is the half-brother of Jesus who got converted after the resurrection. The church in Jerusalem had grown to the point when the apostles scattered that they ordained elders to lead the church. I just get this picture of the church scattered all over the city in many, many house churches with many, many elders, or pastors. All of those pastors are gathered together with James, and Paul start telling them what God has done through his ministry among the Gentiles. When they hear about the Gentiles coming to Christ, they are ecstatic, they praise God, and they worship God. This Jewish church is tickled to death that God is saving Gentiles. But then, they tell Paul his being there creates

a problem, and they ask him what they were supposed to do about this problem.

## **Problem for the Jewish Christians**

You see, Paul actually brought a problem to the church. Sometimes, we don't realize that. We think what a blessing it must have been to have the Apostle Paul come back to the church at Jerusalem, but it wasn't a blessing for the church then. The reason is because Paul's reputation as a preacher had spread throughout the empire and word had gotten back to Jerusalem has been telling the Gentiles. The Christian Jews in Jerusalem know that Paul has been saying they are not under the Law—that there is no animal sacrifice that can take away your sin...that circumcision doesn't save you. That you are free in Christ, and you are under the Holy Spirit. Now Paul is back in Jerusalem, and among all of those Gentiles Paul has been ministering to, Jews are being saved too. But there is a certain sect of the Jews (thousands of Jews, Luke says) who are zealous for the Law and they think Paul doesn't believe in the Law. They don't think he is a Jew anymore. They were ok that he had accepted Christ but he has taken it so far that he wasn't glorying in being a Jew. So, here is what James says, I am paraphrasing—*Paul, we know you have been misunderstood Yes, we do not believe Gentiles should be under Law, they should be under...and he lists those four things they settled in Acts chapter 15. He says we know you have been misunderstood. We know you are still fully obedient to the Law. Now, here is what we are going to do now that you are back in Jerusalem. We are going to let you show how you are a Jew, and how you are dedicated to Law of Moses. We have got four guys that are taking this thirty day vow, and here is what you need to do to let everybody know you are on the Law's side. You need to go into the temple and pay for their offering. In other words, you are going to buy the animal that is going to be offered to God to show these guys are sincere in what they believe and want to do. We are going to bring the blood of an animal into it, and you are going to pay that cost.*—And Paul agrees to this!



## Paul Arrested at the Temple

So Paul goes down to the temple, but he can't enter the temple when he gets there because he has been traveling the Gentile countryside. See, every Jew and every priest knew that because Paul had been traveling where the Gentiles were, he had stepped on some ground and touched some spots where Gentiles had touched and stepped. So he is ceremonially unclean and cannot go into the temple until he goes through a seven day purification process to make himself pure. But in being pure he is admitting that the Gentiles are not pure—and he agrees and he starts through this process! Are any of you struggling with Paul doing this? Well, he doesn't finish it...because before the seventh day is complete, he goes in the temple and there was a group of Jews there from Asia Minor, from Ephesus most likely (Remember, Paul spent two years in Ephesus. That is where the riots happened, ending in him leaving the Jewish synagogue and shaking the dust off his feet, and then he started teaching the whole city.). Now remember, Paul isn't there in Jerusalem on an ordinary weekend; he shows up on the day of Pentecost so there aren't just the normal residents of Jerusalem there. Jewish males have come from all over the Roman Empire back to Jerusalem to celebrate this great feast. So while Paul is in the temple, some people who saw him in Ephesus see him in the temple, and they yell—*Men of Israel, there he is! The man you have heard about who is against us as a people, who is against the Law, who is against circumcision, who is against Moses. That is him!*—Luke tells us they grab him. They seize him. They bind him. They beat him. They would have killed him.

Now, Luke is going to tell us they had misinformation. They were telling everybody that he brought a Greek into the temple because they saw him earlier in the week with Trophimus. Because they assumed he was with Trophimus, they now assume he brought Trophimus into the temple (not the court of the Gentiles, but in the court of the Israelites). Why would they assume this? They would assume this because they, themselves, heard him preach against Israel as a people, against Moses, against the Law, against circumcision, against animal sacrifices being offered in the temple as a way to atone for sin. So they assume if he thinks this temple is

ordinary and common, then he would bring an ordinary and common, unclean guy into the temple. They believe he has just defiled the temple, so they are stirring the crowd, and they believe they are right.

Let's pause here just for a moment. Are they right on charge number one? If you were a Jew and you were listening to Paul preach about Christ, would you get the idea that Paul doesn't believe Israel is God's covenant people anymore? Would you believe he is saying you don't have to be circumcised in order to be saved? Would you hear him saying you don't have to live under the Law of Moses now because you are now under the Spirit? As a matter of fact, would you believe that he is actually teaching that if you try to live under the Law you are going to become more sinful and the only way you can be sanctified is forgetting about the Law of Moses and bringing yourself under the control of God's Holy Spirit? Would any of you get that idea? Yes.

Now, what about charge number two? Do any of us believe that Paul would have brought a Greek into the court of the Israelites knowing there was a sign there? By the way, we have excavated these signs. We know the Bible is right when the Bible talks about Jesus breaking down that middle wall of partition between the court of the Gentiles and the court of Israelite. There was a doorway and there were two signs, one written in Greek, and one written in Latin. They basically warned you that if you were a foreigner (if you were not a Jew) and you went through this gate, you would bring on yourself what was going to happen to you, and what would happen is you would be killed. You can't blame them because it is your fault. You are not supposed to be in there, so once you go through there you are bringing death upon yourself. According to historians, Israel had the authority from Rome to kill anybody they found inside that court of Israelite. Do any of you believe Paul would have brought a Gentile into that and got him killed? Of course not...so this is not true. The crowd has misinformation, even though part of their information may be correct.

### **Respond Based on Christianity and the Bible**

Now, I want to stop here just for a moment because we know what happens to Paul...and I just happen to be leaning on the side that he

brought this on himself. But even if Paul brought this on himself, does the crowd have the right to do what the crowd is getting ready to do? No...no. As Christians, even when somebody else is doing wrong, we do not have the right to do what we sometimes want to do when we get in a crowd. Now, I want to say this. When you gather in a crowd, you probably believe you are right to gather and you probably believe your perspective is right. But always remember that not everybody is going to agree with you. We have seen this play out in the news—how a group of people can gather together in a crowd for a principle they believe is right, and then an opposing group looks at them and wonders how they could do all the things they were doing and believe those things are right to do. They believe what they are doing actually cancels out the actual message they are standing for! Do you know what I am talking about? And then, six months, a year later, that opposing group gathers and really believes *they* are gathering for the right reason because they are standing for a principle they believe to be true. But now the first group is looking at them believing that their actions cancel what they are doing as a crowd. It's just amazing how sometimes when we get in a crowd things can escalate to the point that what we are doing is actually canceling out the very message we say we are standing for! Israel wasn't exempt from this, and Christians aren't exempt from this. The church is not exempt from this. Please be careful. When you do something wrong, you don't want the crowd to have the right to do against you what they shouldn't do. And you don't have the right to do wrong to that other person who is not in the crowd you are in. Now, the only reason I said what I said is because I am sixty-one years old and I have been here 39 years. You and I, and America need to hear what I just said from the basis of Christianity and the Bible. We can't let our actions disprove or discredit the very thing we say we believe in.

Now, if I can bring this down to me, personally, I have studied all week long and was struggling with whether Paul was right or wrong to be there, and it's obvious to me the crowd was wrong. Whether Paul's right or wrong is not the issue. The crowd was wrong to do what the crowd did and the crowd did what they did, partially because it was right, but partially because they had false information—and somebody stirred the pot. My two smallest grandsons had two ball games yesterday afternoon in

Mayfield. Celisa wanted to know if we were going to go because she was worried about the sermon not being done. I said, "Sure, let's go" and so we go to the game. Now, get this. I knew before I went to that game what I was going to say to you this morning about the crowd. And then I go to a ball game...my third-grader and my fifth-grader are playing a ballgame. We thought the game was at 5:10 pm, but it started at 5:00. We walk in ten minutes late. The first half is already halfway through, and when we walk in, it is 16–0, the other team ahead. We hadn't scored yet. Now, I want to preface this with something I heard last week. I was dropping off my grandboys to their house. My grandboys love sports so I had my radio on 102.5 FM, ESPN in Nashville, and I actually heard this advertisement and it broke my heart: "The State of Tennessee has lost 30% of its youth referees because of the behavior of parents and adults at ball games." They made that statement, and then two kid's voices come on and they say, "Mom, Dad...when you come to the ball game to watch us play, would you act like an adult?" Now, back to the ballgame. I am at the ball game and I usually never say a word. We are down 16–0. We brought our team a little luck and we scored four points. I am sitting down on front row, my feet right on the out of bounds line. I am sitting with our group, but part of the other team's group is around me. When I sit down, the score is 24–4. All of a sudden, on the far side of the gymnasium, a referee calls a walk on one of our players, and we are down 24–4 in the first half! And this guy close to me yells, "ARE YOU KIDDING ME! HE WALKED! BLOW THE WHISTLE!" and he starts yelling at the ref. I don't know what came over me—but I just turned and with a smile on my face said very nicely, "Are you kidding me? Your team is up 24–4. Does it really matter if the ref called a foul or not?" He muttered some words (I realize I shouldn't have said what I said, even though I was grinning and smiling), turned back around, and watched the rest of the ball game, and never said a word. Can you imagine somebody in the crowd doing that? But then again, I couldn't imagine someone in a crowd doing what I just did! Anyway, we leave that ballgame and we drive over to the Mayfield Middle School. Celisa says, "Are you sure we have time to go to the next game, because if you need to go and study on the sermon, we don't have to go?" ☺ I say, "No, it's not going to matter how much more I study. We are good!" And I assured her,

"Honey, I am sorry, that is not me. I have never done that in my life!" I have never talked to a fan of another team during a game (even though I had a smile on my face!). Now, this next game is different. We jump up 6 to nothing. Then it gets to 6–6...then we are 9–6...then it is 9–9...then we are 12–9...then we are up 14–12. But then, *they* get ahead. We start the second half and they really get ahead. Now, I am sitting in the middle of the court, and the other team's fans are on the same side as I am but over toward the left side of the court. I see our team running to the right end of the court towards their hoop when one of their players breaks out for a layup and one of our players is running behind him. Now, I honestly didn't know at the time that it was my grandson, but it was—I am just being honest. Their guy goes up for a layup, but he got his feet tangled up (these are fourth and fifth graders) and he just falls on the ground. Well, from the perspective of the left side of the court where the other team's fans were, it *looked* like the player behind him (our team, my grandson) tripped him and that is why he fell, and so it *looked* like the ref didn't blow his whistle...and they went berserk! You are not going to believe this...Bro Ricky, your pastor, who never says a word at a ball game—I get up out of my seat because I know they have got the wrong perspective! I know they really think that ref blew the call, but the ref didn't. So, I just went up in the stands to explain to them that he really didn't blow the call and if they had my seat and perspective...I did that!?! Now, I was nice and kind, I wasn't arguing; I just wanted them to know the truth. But that was not the time to defend the truth (Even if you are Bro Ricky, it was not the time to do that!). So, you will never see me in another ball game the entirety of my life 😊 because I don't know if that was of the Holy Spirit or if it was of the flesh!

Now, it doesn't matter if I was right or wrong, and it didn't matter if the crowd around Paul was right or wrong. Regardless if *they* are right or wrong, it's always important that *you and I* are right. Can I tell you their perspective? Paul was teaching that Israel is no longer God's covenant people; the church is now God's covenant people, and that Israel's whole purpose was bring forth to the Christ—and when the Christ was born, He was going to die on a cross and He was going to break down that middle wall of partition. He was growing Jew and Gentiles together and there was

going to be something greater than a national identity of the people, and that was a spiritual identity of a people called the church. But if you have that other perspective, you heard the Apostle Paul's teaching and it made you want to defend your nationality. If we are not careful, because of our love for Israel, as a nation of people we have let it creep into our belief that we, as a nation, are God's people. We need to remember who God's people are in America. The people in America who are God's people are the church.

I don't know if Paul was right or wrong, but I know the reaction of the crowd was wrong, and you and I are in a crowd. See, I didn't just represent New Covenant Christian Academy the other night during that ballgame, I represented the church, and you do too. Here's what this story says to me. Just like Paul, from time to time, we are going to blow it. But when we blow it, God's will can still be done in our lives. But let's be careful here. We always want everybody to listen to us, but perhaps there are some people we need to be listening to. The church shouldn't just listen to elders, pastors, and apostles. Pastors, elders, and apostles should listen to the church too because God speaks to His leaders and He speaks to His body.