A NEW KIND OF COMMUNITY

By 1631, Puritans who were fleeing religious persecution in England were established thriving colonies along the coast of America. These Puritans set about establishing a theocratic form of government, envisioning that they would be a new Israel. Their early laws demanded regular church attendance and tithe paying. Lawmakers declared blasphemy, witchcraft, adultery, homosexuality, worship of other gods, and declining infant baptism punishable by death. People suspected of speaking ill of pastoral leadership or expressing different views from those being preached were arraigned before church tribunals and received civil punishments. Roger Williams, a fellow Puritan immigrant who was initially invited to preach, was condemned and banished by one such trial for advocating for the complete separation of church and state and had to rely on the nearby Native American tribes to survive the harsh winter. Evidently, the Puritans had come to America looking for religious freedom for themselves but not for others. The persecuted had again become the persecutors.

After surviving his banishment, Williams secured a charter from the English monarchy to found the colony of Rhode Island where the state would never require a religious test of its citizens or leaders. All were equal under the law in this new colony that welcomed all kinds of religious outcasts such as Baptists, Quakers, and Jews. This week’s lesson will focus on how the apostle Paul urged civic leaders to leave religious matters alone, and how his commitment to the gospel drove him to sometimes defend his rights, sometimes surrender them depending on the situation.
Write out Acts 25 and 26 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Acts 25:17–22. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS ACCUSATIONS

Much can be learned about religious liberty and the separation of church and state from the book of Acts. No other book of the Bible records more stories that illustrate the intrinsic volatility of blending the two domains, and no other figure in the book was arrested and tried more often than the apostle Paul. He endured several arrests and trials in the many cities he traveled to. We’ll be looking at Acts 21–26, which records in detail part of the intense series of trials that followed Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem.

Paul suffered tremendous abuse in many of the places he visited as a missionary, and he certainly treasured religious liberty wherever he could find it. He ministered in Corinth longer than any other city, partially because his religious liberties were protected there. Gallio, the Proconsul of Achaia, made some distinction between civil and religious law. When Paul faced religious accusations, Gallio was decidedly against using the power of state to settle such issues (Acts 18:15). The Roman Empire would have been a very different place if every Roman proconsul, magistrate, governor, and caesar had consistently upheld the noble principles of freedom that Gallio demonstrated. By refusing to judge religious matters, Gallio distinguished himself in history as a champion of religious liberty.

The Roman judges in Paul’s trials recognized the same distinction between the civil and religious. Lysias, commander of the garrison in Jerusalem, testified, “I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their [the Jewish] law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains” (Acts 23:29). In a later trial, the governor Festus explained to King Agrippa that “When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion.... because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters” (Acts 25:18–20).

Paul defended himself by citing that civil magistrates were responsible for civil matters, not religious ones. Speaking to Festus, he said, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.... if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying” (Acts 25:8, 11). In making this statement, Paul clearly emphasized the difference between the religious offense he was accused of and the magistrate’s civil duties.

Festus acknowledged Paul’s innocence, saying, “I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death” (Acts 25:25), and Agrippa agreed: “This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains (26:31). Had Paul not appealed to Caesar, a legal action that could not later be rescinded, both Festus and Agrippa would have been willing to set him free (26:32). Paul was ultimately sent to Rome, bound as a prisoner.
CITIZENS’ RIGHTS

Understanding the privileges and protections Roman citizenship provided helps explain why Paul appealed to Caesar in his trial before Festus. Paul was fortunate enough to be born a Roman citizen, but others paid exorbitant fees to gain the rights, protections, and privileges given to Roman citizens (Acts 22:28). Paul claimed the rights his citizenship provided multiple times during his trials. Acts first records this happening in the city of Philippi (in modern-day Greece), where he established the first Christian church in Europe. Chapter 16 tells of how Paul and Silas were severely beaten, arrested, shackled at the ankles, and thrown in prison after their ministry threatened the income of local wealthy slave owners.

It’s important to note that while Paul at times claimed his citizenship, he was never focused on his own rights. The incident in Philippi demonstrates this quality too, for he did not demand his rights immediately upon being arrested or even when he was publicly beaten before his trial—a grievous violation of those rights. Instead, he went quietly to his cell, singing hymns through much of the night, and even chose to stay when an earthquake miraculously threw the prison doors open. Paul’s remarkable response to the abuse and injustice affected the prison guard so powerfully that he and his family became some of the first converts of that first European church that very same night. That’s not to say Paul was unwilling to push back against the authorities when the situation called for it. When asked to leave the city quietly, he declared that he would not go until the magistrates themselves came and spoke with him—his right as a Roman citizen. Requesting that Paul and Silas depart in secret was unjust after they had suffered such wrongful mistreatment. Paul respected the magistrates and their authority, but he expected a certain level of respect in return. Once he had received that respect—once the magistrates spoke with him—he complied with their request to leave.

Paul displayed an extraordinary ability to carefully discern when to surrender his rights and when to push back, protest, and appeal. He maintained this balance through the rest of his life. After a few more missionary tours, Paul was apprehended in Jerusalem. When coming under the charge of a Roman centurion, Paul objected to being whipped, again without a fair trial (Acts 22:30–34). Once again, he wasn’t claiming his rights merely out of self-interest; he was both defending God’s right to his service and safeguarding the centurion from the consequences of mishandling a Roman citizen.

It was in this context that Paul’s trial before Governor Festus took place several years later. As noted in inGest, Festus knew Paul was innocent (Acts 25:18–21, 25) but threatened to send Paul back to Jerusalem to be judged there because he wanted to gain the Jews’ favor (v. 9). Paul appealed to the highest court in the empire in that moment of peril, using the rights his citizenship provided to seek a fair hearing before Caesar himself.

Just as Paul’s case went to the highest court in Rome, God’s people will face similar trials during the final showdown between good and evil. No one should be surprised when faithful believers again stand before the highest tribunals of this world.

Defending and Surrendering Rights

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After looking at your scribed and annotated text, what special insights do your marks seem to point to overall?

What questions emerge after studying this passage? What parts are difficult?

What other principles and conclusions do you find?

What was Paul’s purpose in using his Roman citizenship if not merely to protect himself?

Does citizenship today afford certain rights that can help us advance God’s work? Maybe it depends on the country?
What relationship do the following verses have with Acts 25, 26?

Acts 16:16–40
Acts 18:12–17
Acts 22:22–29
Acts 23:23–30
Acts 27:24
Acts 28:16–30
Romans 15:22–33
Philippians 1:12–14
Philippians 4:22
2 Timothy 4:6–18

What other verses come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

OUR RIGHTS

Paul’s discernment between when to surrender his rights and when to embrace them extended to his missionary work. In one situation with the Corinthian church in particular, Paul chose to relinquish his right to ask the church for financial support because some people questioned his motives, wondering if he preached for his own financial gain (1 Cor. 9:1–14). This was, of course, a ridiculous accusation as Paul often worked as a tentmaker to sustain himself (Acts 18:3), but he knew that simply verbally contending this gossip would not be enough. He chose not to ask for wages from the churches so that no false rumors would “hinder the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:12).

Paul pleaded with the Corinthian believers to follow his example in prioritizing others’ wellbeing above their own rights (1 Cor. 11:1). In one instance, he argued that even though they knew idols hold no power, they should not eat any food offered to idols to avoid confusing other believers (especially new ones) and thereby hindering their mission work (1 Cor. 10:28, 29). Paul valued rights, privileges, and liberties, but he valued other people’s salvation more, and that is the essence of his argument. Anytime Paul made a decision, he was more concerned about the ultimate impact his choice would have on others than how it might preserve his rights. Christians should defend their rights only when it benefits others or protects their service to God, never at others’ expense. Knowing Paul’s deepest motivation explains why he sometimes surrendered and other times defended his rights.

Jesus set a similar example when it came to defending Himself. Though He certainly wasn’t silent during His ministry. John 5:19–47 records a very systematic defense of His Divine work, and Matthew 22 details Jesus’ candid answers when facing the Pharisees’ and Herodians’ scrutinizing questions. By the time of His final trial, the mob’s frenzy and the leaders’ anger were out of control. Had He stood before a more receptive crowd as Paul did at his trials, perhaps He would’ve answered His accusers, but He remained silent because He knew they were not looking for answers, but for blood. There were no longer any ears to hear His words.

The example that both Christ and Paul set should challenge each of us to deeply examine the motives behind our choices and our willingness to surrender everything to God. Paul gave up all for the sake of the gospel, but he was also willing to stand his ground when it advanced God’s mission, which exhibits perhaps a different kind of surrender and certainly a God-led kind of discernment. When believers embrace that level of submission to God’s will, nothing can inhibit His work through us.
Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the passage, what are some personal applications you are convicted of in your life?

What are some practical applications you must make in your school, family, workplace, and church life?

OUR POWER AS WITNESSES

“The apostles suffered extreme torture because of the painful position in which they were left, but they did not murmur. Instead, in the utter darkness and desolation of the dungeon, they encouraged each other by words of prayer and sang praises to God because they were found worthy to suffer shame for His sake. Their hearts were cheered by a deep and earnest love for the cause of their Redeemer. Paul thought of the persecution he had been instrumental in bringing upon the disciples of Christ, and he rejoiced that his eyes had been opened to see, and his heart to feel, the power of the glorious truths which once he despised.” (Ellen White, *The Acts of the Apostles* [1911], 213, 214.)

“The severity with which the jailer had treated the apostles had not aroused their resentment. Paul and Silas had the spirit of Christ, not the spirit of revenge. Their hearts, filled with the love of the Saviour, had no room for malice against their persecutors.” (Ibid., 216.)

“When Paul first visited Corinth, he found himself among a people who were suspicious of the motives of strangers. The Greeks on the seacoast were keen traders. So long had they trained themselves in sharp business practices, that they had come to believe that gain was godliness, and that to make money, whether by fair means or foul, was commendable. Paul was acquainted with their characteristics, and he would give them no occasion for saying that he preached the gospel in order to enrich himself. He might justly have claimed support from his Corinthian hearers; but this right he was willing to forgo, lest his usefulness and success as a minister should be injured by the unjust suspicion that he was preaching the gospel for gain. He would seek to remove all occasion for misrepresentation, that the force of his message might not be lost.” (Ibid., 349.)

“In cases where we are brought before the courts, we are to give up our rights, unless it brings us in collision with God. It is not our rights we are pleading for, but God’s right to our service.” (Ellen White, *Last Day Events* [1992], 146.)

“Kings, governors, and great men will hear of you through the reports of those who are at enmity with you, and your faith and character will be misrepresented before them. But those who are falsely accused will have an opportunity to appear in the presence of their accusers to answer for themselves. They will have the privilege of bringing the light before those who are called the great men of the earth, and if you have studied the Bible, if you are ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear, your enemies will not be able to gainsay your wisdom.” (Ellen White, *Evangelism* [1946], 560, 561.)
Defending and Surrendering Rights

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why did Festus and Agrippa want to free Paul?

Why didn’t Festus and Agrippa set Paul free?

Why did Paul appeal to Caesar?

What motivated Paul to defend his rights?

What motivated Paul to surrender his rights?

What can we learn from when Jesus defended Himself and when He remained silent?

How can we know when we should surrender our rights silently and when should we defend them?

Which is more natural, surrendering our rights or defending them?

How can we gain the discernment and courage to go against our inclinations when needed?