

# Is it wrong for Christians to defend their rights?

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# Introduction

Christians in the West are familiar with apologetics as an intellectual or worldview exercise. We are less familiar with apologetics as a legal defence. This is an unfamiliarity that needs to be quickly remedied.

With nurses disciplined for offering to pray for patients and people losing their jobs for holding Biblical views on homosexuality, Christians need a theology of defending themselves in the courts. While we certainly must turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and love our enemies when faced with personal offences (Matt. 5:38–48), we must not assume that defending ourselves—strenuously and sometimes even defiantly—before the governing authorities is inconsistent with being a follower of Jesus or antithetical to the propagation of the gospel.

We think of Acts as the great missionary book of the Bible. And it is: from Pentecost to persecution to Paul's missionary journeys, we see the word of God go forth from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. But in addition to being a narrative of great missionary advance, Acts was written as a legal defence. Luke was at pains to demonstrate to most excellent Theophilus (likely a Roman official or a member of the societal elite) that Christianity was not hell-bent on overthrowing Roman rule and was not in violation of the religious provisions of Roman law. Five times in the last main section of the book (chapters 21–28) we see Paul defending the spiritual and legal legitimacy of his gospel and his ministry: before the mob in Jerusalem (22:1–21), before the council (23:1–10), before Felix (24:1–27), before Festus (25:1–12), and before Agrippa (26:1–32). In these chapters we repeatedly find the word (or some variation of the word) *apologia* as Paul makes his apology or defence (22:1; 24:10; 25:8; 26:1–2, 24; cf. 19:33). The Apostle Paul in Acts is a missionary, a pastor, and a cultural apologist.

We should note four things about Paul's defence, in particular about his first defence in Jerusalem (21:27–22:21).

## 1. Paul Had Reason to Give a Defence

There was strong opposition to the Apostle Paul and his ministry. Part of this was owing to the serious theological differences between the Jews and the Jewish Christians. Part of the opposition was due to personal animus against Paul, and part was owing to slander and misinformation. People were ready to believe the worst about Paul (or ready to make up the worst about him). They thought he had brought a Greek into the temple (21:27–29). They thought he belonged to a revolutionary guerrilla group called the Assassins (21:38). It was a perfect recipe for hatred and violent attack.



You can see why Paul was so thankful for those who were not ashamed of his chains (2 Tim. 1:16) and why it was such consolation to the persecuted Christians in Hebrews that Jesus was not ashamed to call them his brothers (Heb. 2:11; cf. 10:33). There was a cost to associating with people like Paul. Like Jesus, he was controversial, embattled, and embroiled in legal wrangling. Paul did not float above the fray. He never found a way to be so comprehensively nice and invested in social justice (Gal. 2:10) that his enemies patted him on the back, or even left him alone.

## 2. Paul Was Eager to Give a Defence

There are times in the epistles where Paul refuses to defend himself (though later defends himself anyway). He understands that sometimes we get into more trouble by trying to respond to every accusation thrown our way. Jesus didn't do much to defend himself. But that may not be the best example because his specific mission was to die an atoning death for our sins. The point is: no one should (or even can) defend himself against every opponent, every injustice, or every hurt.

But "every" is not the same as none. In fact, in the final chapters of Acts, providing a defence for his gospel ministry is Paul's singular concern.

When dealing with the Romans, he does not hesitate to claim his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 22:22–29) or to let people know he hails from the impressive city of Tarsus (21:39). And when dealing with the Jews, he makes no qualms about emphasizing his Jewish credentials—that they are his brothers and fathers (22:1), that he can speak their language (v. 2), that he was trained by the most influential rabbi of his time (v. 3), that he was full of zeal (v. 4), that his conversion was attested by a devout and well-respected man (v. 12), that like the prophet Samuel he was praying in the temple and received a vision (v. 17).

In his first defence in Jerusalem before the Jews, just like in his subsequent defences before Roman magistrates,

Paul is keen to show not only that his message is consistent with the Jewish religion and by divine commission, but that he has not broken any laws and does not deserve the mistreatment he is receiving. The same Paul who was not afraid to suffer in Jerusalem and did not count his life worth anything so long as he could preach the gospel (Acts 20:22–24), was not about to let his legal rights be abridged and the harshest

allegations against him go unanswered. Paul understood that to quietly accept injustice could have been simpler and perhaps even personally satisfying (Acts 5:41), but in his case (as in an increasing number of our cases), an unwillingness to defend himself would not have served the cause of the gospel. His silence would not have strengthened Theophilus in the faith and it would not have helped the fledgling church. Paul wanted to show that this new faith was not anti-Jewish and was not inciting rebellion against Rome. Paul claimed his citizenship and challenged the likes of Felix, Festus, and Agrippa so that he might finish his course and bring the gospel to the heart of the Roman Empire. He knew that at times defending the faith means defending your God-given rights.



### 3. Paul's Defence Was Often Ineffective

In Acts 22 we see how monumentally unsuccessful Paul's brilliant speeches could be. Paul can't even finish his defence without the crowd crying out for his death (v. 22). He had truth on his side, but truth doesn't always win out in a court of law, let alone in mob rule. True, Paul had more success making his case to the Romans than before his own countrymen, but even then he never received the strong vindication he deserved. His defence may have been convincing to the Roman magistrates, but they were still content to put political expediency above personal integrity. Acts 28 ends triumphantly with the gospel going forth (v. 31). And yet Paul is still under house arrest (v. 30) and will eventually be killed a few years later under Nero (2 Tim. 4:6).



### 4. Paul Used His Defence as an Opportunity to Preach Christ

It may look like Paul is obsessed with giving his testimony in the last chapters of Acts. But the only reason he wants to give his testimony is so he can testify to Christ. Time after time, when put on trial, Paul found a way to talk about the resurrection of Christ, about faith and repentance, and about the Messianic identity of Jesus. We can be quick to say “Let’s stop all this fighting, all this controversy, all this culture war stuff, and get on with the work of evangelism”—as if Paul’s defence was not also evangelism! More than ever, we must be ready for someone to ask us a reason for the hope that we have—even if they mistakenly believe our hope to be hate.

For Paul, defending the faith was just as important as preaching the faith because he did not see the two as different tasks. He was a missionary at heart. His passion was the proclamation of the gospel. If that meant

death, he was ready to die, so long as it was his death and not the death of freedom for the gospel to go out boldly and without hindrance.

Paul was willing for his life to be cut short if the work of the gospel could go on. But so long as the gospel itself was maligned, misrepresented, and unfairly marginalized, he was not about to submit himself to slander or surrender a single civic right. He would keep preaching the Christian gospel. He would keep on defending the religious and legal legitimacy of the Christian faith. And he would not believe for a moment that the two tasks were aimed at different ends.

Opposition to orthodox Christianity is likely to grow in the years ahead, especially in the former Christendom of the West. No doubt, there will be times when it will be our glory to overlook an offence (Prov. 19:11). But not when the reputation of the church and proliferation of the gospel are at stake. Defending the faith and defending our freedoms do not have to be at odds. If we want Christ to be known in our day, we cannot be silent about his redeeming work nor about our rights as his witnesses.



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Christians are called to ‘turn the other cheek’ and to love their enemies.

So is there ever a good reason for Christians to take steps to defend their freedoms?

In this short booklet, Kevin DeYoung brings biblical wisdom to this important and increasingly pressing question.

Christian Concern provides a series of booklets, helping Christians understand and live out their calling to be salt and light to the world.

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