

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 26

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 26 presents Paul's defense before King Agrippa II, Bernice, and the assembled dignitaries at Caesarea — the most extended and theologically rich of Paul's three autobiographical accounts in Acts (cf. Acts 9, 22). Paul opens by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to speak before one so familiar with Jewish customs and controversies (vv. 1–3). He then traces his life in three movements: his former life as a zealous Pharisee and persecutor of Christians (vv. 4–11), his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road (vv. 12–18), and his subsequent obedient mission to Jews and Gentiles alike (vv. 19–23). The climactic exchange with Festus (vv. 24–25) and Agrippa (vv. 26–29) frames the entire speech as a call to faith, not merely a legal defense. The chapter closes with the officials' verdict: Paul is innocent, and had he not appealed to Caesar, he could have been released (vv. 30–32).

The Damascus road account here is the most theologically elaborated of the three tellings. The risen Christ speaks directly to Paul, commissions him as a witness and servant to both Jews and Gentiles, and frames the mission in terms that echo Isaiah's Servant Songs — opening eyes, turning from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, receiving forgiveness and inheritance among the sanctified (v. 18). Paul's preaching of repentance and works befitting repentance (v. 20) situates his mission squarely within the prophetic tradition and the hope of Israel — a point he will press in verses 22–23. The resurrection of Christ is the hinge on which everything turns: Paul's conversion, his commission, his preaching, and the hope of Israel all converge at the empty tomb.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this passage is to demonstrate that the gospel Paul preaches is not a departure from Israel's hope but its fulfillment — and to call every hearer, whatever their status or prior resistance, to turn and receive it. The chapter is structured as a courtroom drama that slowly but unmistakably transforms into an evangelistic appeal. Agrippa does not judge Paul; Paul, in effect, witnesses to Agrippa. The word “persuade” (v. 28, *πείθω*) is the key — Agrippa senses that Paul is working toward his conversion, not merely his acquittal. God intends readers of Acts 26 to feel the same pressure: the resurrection of Christ and the testimony of the transformed persecutor constitute a claim on every life. The passage also intends to establish that faithful, obedient witness — including witness in chains, before hostile authorities — is itself the fulfillment of the mission Christ gave. Paul is not a prisoner; he is a witness. The reader is invited to see their own situation, resistance, and opportunity through the same lens.

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ transforms His chief enemy into His most eloquent witness — and through that witness, presses His claim on all who hear.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Paul’s testimony that the resurrection of Jesus is the hinge-point of all history — the event that fulfills Israel’s hope, demands a verdict from every hearer, and can transform even the most resistant enemy into a faithful witness. Every reader stands where Agrippa stood: the evidence is in, the appeal is live, and a response is required.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of Agrippa’s Response (v. 28)

The most contested exegetical point in this chapter is Agrippa’s reply in verse 28: “*In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?*” The Greek (*en oligō me peitheis Christianon poiēsai*) is genuinely ambiguous, and translations diverge sharply. The KJV’s “Almost thou persuadest me” has generated an entire tradition of evangelistic preaching built on the idea of the almost-persuaded soul teetering at the edge of conversion. This reading has significant pastoral force but is exegetically strained. The phrase most likely carries irony or even sarcasm — Agrippa recognizing what Paul is doing and deflecting it with a dismissive quip: “Do you think that in such a short time you can make me a Christian?” Paul’s response in verse 29, however, treats the irony with complete seriousness — “whether short or long” — refusing to let the deflection stand. **Reformed verdict:** The KJV/Wesleyan “almost persuaded” reading overstates the text but is not entirely wrong in its pastoral instinct. Agrippa’s remark does reveal that the evangelistic pressure of Paul’s speech has been felt. The Reformed reading presses further: Agrippa’s deflection is itself a verdict, a refusal — and Paul’s counter-response is a model of winsome, persistent gospel appeal that will not release its hearer merely because they have attempted to evade it.

The Three Accounts of Paul’s Conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26)

Some critical scholars and harmonization-skeptics point to apparent discrepancies between the three Pauline conversion accounts in Acts as evidence of Lukan editorial invention. The differences — who heard the voice, who fell down, the specific wording of the commission — are real but explicable. Luke is not a stenographer but a historian of the highest ancient caliber (cf. Luke 1:1–4); Paul is speaking to different audiences and selecting details appropriate to each occasion. Acts 26 gives the most theologically elaborated version because Paul is addressing a king conversant with Jewish Scripture and expectation. The commission in verse 18 draws deeply on Isaiah’s Servant language because it is precisely the fulfillment of that Servant mission that Paul wants Agrippa to

recognize. **Reformed verdict:** The variation in the three accounts is not a problem to be solved but a feature to be appreciated — it reflects the selectivity of an oral witness speaking to specific audiences, not contradiction. The theological center (encounter with the risen Christ, commission to witness, the gospel as fulfillment of Israel's hope) is entirely consistent across all three accounts.

Paul's Defense as Apologetics vs. Evangelism

Some Baptist and evangelical readings treat this passage primarily as a model of Christian apologetics — defending the faith before hostile authority, maintaining composure, appealing to public verifiability (“this was not done in a corner,” v. 26). This reading has genuine merit and should not be dismissed. However, the dominant movement of the chapter is not apologetic but evangelistic. Paul is not primarily trying to win his case; he is trying to win Agrippa. The legal frame is the occasion, not the purpose. **Qualify:** The apologetic dimension is real and instructive — Paul's appeal to publicly verifiable events, to Agrippa's knowledge of Scripture and prophecy, and to the coherence of his own testimony are all genuine apologetic moves. But they are in service of the evangelistic aim that becomes explicit in verses 27–29. A purely apologetic reading misses the chapter's dramatic climax.

Charismatic/Pentecostal Emphasis on the Damascus Road Experience

Some Pentecostal and charismatic interpreters press the Damascus road account as a model for ongoing Spirit encounters — dramatic, experiential, transformative, paradigmatic for conversion. There is something right here: Paul does not treat the Damascus road as routine. It was cataclysmic, unsolicited, and sovereign. But Acts 26 does not present the Damascus road primarily as an experiential paradigm for all believers. It is presented as a *commission* and as *evidence* — evidence that Jesus is risen, that Paul's message is not invented but given, and that the one Paul once persecuted is alive and speaking. **Qualify and redirect:** The experiential intensity of Paul's conversion is real, but the passage's own emphasis falls on the *content* of the commission and the *claim of the resurrection*, not on the experiential form. Preaching this text as a call to dramatic encounter misses the chapter's own weight.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 42:6–7; 49:6** — The Servant commission language in Acts 26:18 (“to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light”) draws directly on Isaiah's Servant Songs. Paul understands his mission as the fulfillment of Israel's Servant-vocation, now carried out through the risen Christ's own ambassador.
- **Acts 9:1–19** — The first account of Paul's conversion provides the narrative foundation; Acts 26 is its most theologically elaborated restatement, illuminating the commission that lay beneath the dramatic event from the beginning.

- **Romans 1:16; 15:16–21** — Paul’s theology of the gospel as “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” and his self-understanding as a priestly minister of the gospel to the Gentiles unpacks the commission of Acts 26:17–18; both texts show that Acts 26 is not isolated autobiography but the narrative basis of Paul’s entire apostolic theology.
- **1 Corinthians 15:1–11** — Paul’s appeal to the resurrection as publicly attested, historically verifiable, and the irreducible center of the gospel directly corroborates Acts 26:22–26. The resurrection is not a religious idea; it is an event with witnesses, and Paul is one of them.
- **Philippians 3:4–11** — Paul’s own later recounting of his former life as a Pharisee and his revaluation of everything in light of knowing Christ provides the theological interpretation of what Acts 26 narrates as biography. Together they show that the Damascus road was not just a conversion but a re-centering of all knowledge and identity around the risen Lord.

Aim: To demonstrate that Paul’s testimony in Acts 26 is not ancient autobiography but a living appeal — one that presses the resurrection’s claim on every reader, shows that no resistance is beyond Christ’s reach, and calls faithful witness even in chains.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Paul addresses Agrippa; expresses gratitude for his familiarity with Jewish customs; requests a patient hearing	Captatio benevolentiae — standard rhetorical opening; Paul adapts to his audience without compromising his message
4–8	Paul’s former life as a Pharisee, lived according to the strictest sect; now on trial for the hope of Israel — the resurrection of the dead	The resurrection is introduced immediately as the real issue; Agrippa knows this hope
9–11	Paul’s persecution of Christians in Jerusalem: imprisoning, voting for death, forcing blasphemy, pursuing to foreign cities	The severity of his former opposition establishes the magnitude of his conversion
12–14	En route to Damascus with authority from chief priests;	Most detailed version of the Damascus event; “midday”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15–18	the midday light brighter than the sun; all fall to the ground; the voice in Hebrew: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The risen Christ identifies Himself; commissions Paul as servant and witness; promises protection; sends him to open eyes, turn from darkness to light and from Satan’s power to God, for forgiveness and inheritance among the sanctified	light emphasizes its supernatural character; “in the Hebrew language” signals authenticity to a Jewish audience The commission draws on Isaiah’s Servant language; this is the theological heart of the chapter
19–21	Paul’s obedience: preaching to Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea, and Gentiles; urging repentance and works consistent with repentance; the Jews seize him in the temple	Obedience is immediate and comprehensive; the opposition is a direct result of faithful mission
22–23	Paul’s message is what Moses and the prophets said would happen: the Christ would suffer, rise from the dead, and proclaim light to Jews and Gentiles	The resurrection of Christ is the fulfillment of Israel’s Scripture — Paul’s gospel is not a novelty
24	Festus interrupts: “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you insane”	The resurrection provokes the charge of madness — it is an offense to secular rationalism
25–26	Paul responds calmly: “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words”; these things were not done in a corner — Agrippa knows	Public verifiability as apologetic ground; Paul shifts appeal specifically to Agrippa
27–29	Paul presses Agrippa: “Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.”	The evangelistic climax; Paul’s aim is not acquittal but conversion; the chain

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Agrippa deflects; Paul responds: “I would to God that whether short or long, not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am — except for these chains”	reference is wry and humanizing
30–32	Agrippa, Festus, and Bernice confer; verdict: Paul has done nothing deserving death or imprisonment; could have been released had he not appealed to Caesar	Irony: Paul’s appeal to Caesar, which will take him to Rome, is the very mechanism by which God’s earlier promise (Acts 23:11) will be fulfilled

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	The Witness Addresses the King: A Patient Hearing Requested
2	4–8	The Former Life: A Pharisee on Trial for Israel’s Hope
3	9–11	The Persecutor Confessed: The Depth of His Former Opposition
4	12–18	The Damascus Road: Commission of the Risen Christ
5	19–23	Obedient Mission: From Damascus to the Gentiles, Fulfilling Moses and the Prophets
6	24–26	Festus Interrupts: The Resurrection and the Charge of Madness
7	27–29	The Evangelistic Climax: Paul Presses Agrippa for a Verdict
8	30–32	The Ironic Acquittal:

Division	Verses	Label
		Innocent — and Bound for Rome

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ transforms His chief enemy into His most eloquent witness — and through that witness, presses His claim on all who hear.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Paul’s testimony that the resurrection of Jesus is the hinge-point of all history — the event that fulfills Israel’s hope, demands a verdict from every hearer, and can transform even the most resistant enemy into a faithful witness. Every reader stands where Agrippa stood: the evidence is in, the appeal is live, and a response is required.

Applications (Five)

1. The resurrection of Jesus is not a religious idea — it is a public, verifiable event that demands a verdict, not merely an opinion. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul’s appeal to Agrippa is built on the claim that “these things were not done in a corner” (v. 26). He does not ask Agrippa to accept a private spiritual experience — he appeals to public events, known prophecies, and Agrippa’s own knowledge. Modern Christianity has privatized the resurrection into a personal conviction among other personal convictions. Acts 26 will not allow this. The resurrection of Jesus is the kind of claim that, if true, reorganizes everything — and if false, discredits everything. Stop treating it as a preference. Engage it as the event Paul says it is: historically grounded, publicly attested, and demanding your verdict today.

2. No past of opposition, contempt, or even active hostility toward Christ disqualifies anyone from becoming His witness. (*Affections/worship*)

Paul catalogues his past with unflinching detail — imprisoning, voting for death, forcing blasphemy, pursuing to foreign cities (vv. 10–11). He does not soften it. And then he describes what Christ did anyway: “I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness” (v. 16). The one Paul most aggressively persecuted became his sovereign commissioner. If you are carrying shame over a past of contempt for Christ — whether years of active hostility, mockery, or simply indifference so deep it amounted to scorn — bring that past to Acts 26 and see what the risen Christ does with enemies. He commissions them. Let the depth of Paul’s former opposition become the measure of your wonder at grace, not the ceiling of your hope.

3. Faithful witness is the calling of every believer in whatever circumstance they occupy — not only in freedom, but in chains. (*Will/behavior*)

Paul is standing before Agrippa because he has been arrested, imprisoned for two years, and is now awaiting transfer to Rome. None of this has paused his mission. The chains are present (v. 29) but they do not define him — “I am a witness” defines him. Your circumstances may feel like a cage: a difficult workplace, a family situation that limits your freedom, a health crisis that has shrunk your world. Acts 26 calls you to ask not “when will these circumstances change?” but “how is the Lord making me a witness within them?” Paul’s most theologically rich testimony was delivered in custody. Ask the Lord how your current limitation is, in fact, your assignment.

4. The gospel is not a novelty but the fulfillment of everything God has been promising since the beginning — and this should deepen your confidence in Scripture as a whole. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul’s defense before Agrippa rests on continuity: “I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass” (v. 22). The resurrection of Jesus is not a plot-twist that overturns the Old Testament — it is the event the Old Testament has been moving toward. If you have drifted into treating the Old Testament as preliminary or optional, Acts 26 calls you back. Paul’s entire mission and confidence rest on the unity of Scripture. Read Moses and the prophets with the expectation that they are telling you about Christ — because, Paul insists, they are.

5. Gospel witness aims at the conversion of its hearers, not merely the approval of the court — and this should recalibrate what you think you are doing when you speak of Christ. (*Affections/worship*)

Paul is not trying to win his case. He is trying to win Agrippa. By verse 27, the legal defense has become an evangelistic appeal so explicit that Agrippa recognizes it and deflects it. Paul’s response — “I would to God that all who hear me this day might become such as I am” — is one of the most quietly stunning statements in Acts. He is a prisoner appealing to a king, and his deepest wish for the king is that the king would become like him. This is the posture of someone who knows what they have. When you speak of Christ — in conversation, in relationships, in whatever platform God gives you — are you hoping the other person will think well of you, or are you hoping they will come to know what you know? Let Paul’s aim recalibrate yours.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 26 establishes the resurrection of Jesus Christ as both the ground of Christian proclamation and the hinge of redemptive history. Paul does not preach the resurrection as one doctrine among many — he presents it as the interpretive key that unlocks Moses, the prophets, and the entire hope of Israel. God’s faithfulness to

His covenant promises is vindicated at the empty tomb; the darkness-to-light, Satan-to-God, forgiveness-and-inheritance commission of verses 17–18 shows that the resurrection inaugurates a new-covenant reality for both Jews and Gentiles. The chapter also teaches that God’s sovereign purposes are not thwarted by human opposition — Saul’s persecution, Festus’s dismissal, and Agrippa’s deflection are all folded into an unfolding plan that will carry the witness to Rome regardless. God’s intent to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth will not be stopped by chains, courtrooms, or calculated indifference.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 26 is a premier text for the Reformed doctrine of sovereign grace in conversion. Paul’s Damascus road account is paradigmatic: he was not seeking Christ, not open to Christ, not progressing toward Christ — he was violently opposing Christ when the risen Lord appeared to him without invitation, without precondition, and without any cooperative act on Paul’s part. This is not a model of prevenient grace working with a willing sinner; it is irresistible grace breaking in on a resistant enemy. The commission of verse 18 — to turn people from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God — describes a transformation that only God can accomplish. The Reformed tradition, from Calvin through Edwards, has rightly seen in Paul’s conversion the paradigm case of monergistic regeneration: God acting sovereignly to create the faith He demands. Equally significant is Paul’s framing of the gospel as the fulfillment of covenant promise — not a new plan but the culmination of the one plan God has been working since Genesis. This covenantal continuity is the backbone of the Reformed hermeneutic: law, promise, and gospel are not competing systems but unfolding stages of one redemptive covenant, with Christ’s resurrection as the decisive eschatological moment.

Main Takeaway

The risen Christ appeared to His chief persecutor, commissioned him as His witness, and then used his testimony to press His claim on a king — and the claim has not expired. You are standing where Agrippa stood. The evidence is public, the appeal is personal, and deflection is itself a verdict. No past of opposition disqualifies you from receiving this commission; no present chains disqualify you from fulfilling it. The resurrection of Jesus is either the hinge of all history or it is nothing — and if it is the hinge of all history, then the only question that matters today is what you are going to do with it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing this chapter to a model of apologetics or courtroom composure.** It is tempting to preach Acts 26 as a template for “how to defend your faith under pressure” — Paul’s calm, his rhetorical skill, his use of evidence. These features are real and instructive, but they are instrumental. Paul is not primarily defending himself; he is proclaiming the resurrection and pressing Agrippa for a verdict. A sermon that ends with “be composed and prepared to defend your faith” has stopped at the method and missed the message. The purpose of Paul’s composure is evangelism, not self-preservation.
- **Building a sermon on the KJV “almost persuaded” reading without acknowledging its exegetical instability.** The phrase is evocative and has enormous sermonic history (Moody, Sankey’s hymn, countless revival applications). But the text most likely carries Agrippa’s ironic deflection, not his genuine wavering. A preacher who builds the entire homiletical structure on “almost persuaded” is standing on thin exegetical ice. The better move is to acknowledge the genuine ambiguity, settle on the more defensible reading, and then show that Paul’s response (v. 29) makes the evangelistic appeal regardless of Agrippa’s tone.
- **Psychologizing or romanticizing Paul’s conversion without attending to its commission.** The Damascus road account is dramatic, and preachers can spend so much time on the light, the falling, and the voice that they never get to verse 16–18, which is where the chapter’s theological weight lives. The commission — servant, witness, opening eyes, turning from darkness to light — is not a detail following the main event; it is the main event’s purpose. The conversion is the means; the commission is the point.
- **Treating Paul’s innocence in verse 31 as the climax.** The legal verdict (“he has done nothing deserving death or imprisonment”) is structurally important but theologically secondary. Luke’s real interest — and the reader’s — is in what Agrippa said in verse 28 and what Paul said in verse 29. The irony of the closing scene (Paul is innocent but bound for Rome) is Lukan narrative genius: the very appeal that makes release impossible will fulfill Christ’s own promise to get Paul to Rome (Acts 23:11). God’s sovereignty is the climax, not Paul’s acquittal.
- **Failing to let the chapter press the reader to a verdict.** Acts 26 is constructed as an evangelistic appeal. Agrippa is the proxy for the reader. A sermon that explains the passage without pressing the question — “what are you going to do with the resurrection?” — has delivered content without intent. Bullmore’s discipline applies directly here: the claim of this chapter is not merely informational. It calls for a response. Exposition that reaches the end without pressing that response has preached around the passage’s own design.

- **Missing the irony and humanity of Paul's final remark (v. 29).** "I would to God that all who hear me today might become such as I am — except for these chains." This is not throwaway self-deprecation. It is quietly devastating: Paul is the prisoner, Agrippa is the king, and Paul's deepest wish is that the king would have what the prisoner has — minus the physical restraint. If this moment is rushed past, the congregation misses one of the most humanly compelling expressions of gospel confidence in all of Acts. Paul is not miserable in his chains; he is so thoroughly persuaded of what he possesses that he pities those without it, whatever their status.