

Some Words About...

by Terence Y. Mullins

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Profasis (pretext)

The Greek word *profasis* meant pretext. Josephus tells us that Agrippa tried to dissuade the Jews from going to war with Rome and said that those urging war were using “two distinct pretexts for hostilities” (Wars 2:348), and that those pretexts contradicted each other. The story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den begins with Daniel as one of three officials in Darius’ kingdom overseeing many lesser officials. He did such a good job that King Darius was going to place him in charge of the whole kingdom. In order to get rid of Daniel, his subordinates looked for some reason they could give the king. They “sought for some pretext to accuse Daniel but they could not find a pretext” (Daniel 6:4).

New Testament

Jesus said of the scribes that they “devour widows’ houses and for a pretext make long prayers” (Mark 12:40/Luke 20:47). Translators usually avoid making the long prayers the pretext for devouring the houses, and the two statements may not have been delivered together. But F. C. Grant suggested that the scribes unscrupulously accepted hospitality and support. Their long prayers could have been a cover for eating the widows out of house and home.

Referring to his teaching, Jesus said that if he had not come into the world people would “have no pretext for sin” (John 15:22). But now the pretext — “I don’t know” — is abolished.

In a storm on his way to Italy, Paul saw the ship’s sailors lowering a lifeboat “on a pretext of putting out anchors from the bow” (Acts 27:30). He warned the centurion in command that they were deserting, and the centurion cut the lifeboat loose and sent the sailors back to sailing the ship. A display of concern for the welfare of society or of a special group is often a pretext for the personal advantage of the person who is protesting. In Paul’s day as in ours there were those who used the appeal of Jesus Christ as a device to get attention — and to further their own ends. Paul said, “whether as a pretext or as truth, Christ is preached, and in that I rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). There was a surprisingly large amount of rivalry among the leaders of the early church. (Most clearly demonstrated in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, but even in the Gospels, such as in Mark 9:33-37, Luke 22:24-27, and elsewhere.) Even when Christ is preached as a pretext for showing off the preacher’s personality, learning, and eloquence, the fact is that Christ is preached and the impressive defects of the preacher may overshadow the gospel but do not completely obscure it.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:5 Paul points out that the Thessalonians themselves know that when he and his team were with them “we never used words to flatter nor as a pretext to swindle.” There is a thin line between complementing an audience to establish a friendly atmosphere for presenting one’s case and flattering an audience to make them less on guard against deceptive statements or petitions. The Christian way is always the straightforward way, the honest way, the truthful way. Paul was out to win people to follow Jesus Christ, not to follow Paul and his friends. Throughout the letter Paul constantly emphasizes the evidence of others’ personal experience of his methods. The phrase “as you know” rings throughout every chapter.

Today

When someone tells you that you have come into a large amount of money and asks for your name, address, and social security number, that is a pretext for cleaning out your bank account and running up a huge debt on your credit cards. When your bank begins a letter to you “As a most valued customer,” that is a pretext for tying up your money in a thirty month CD. And when your neighbor says, “You are one of the most level headed persons around here,” that is a pretext for getting you to attend the next meeting of the Town Watch.

When we accept the pretext, we are deceived. The trouble is that when we are presented with two contradictory pretexts and we reject one of them, the natural tendency is to accept the other. When Agrippa pointed out that the two pretexts for going to war against Rome were contradictory, some Jews accepted one pretext and some accepted the other, and they went to war with disastrous results. When someone (or some group) urges action for a certain reason, we must focus on the action, not on the supposed reason. The pretext gets the attention, but the action is the really important thing. All the consequences of the action must be taken into account. The pretext fades when the action begins.

King Agrippa pointed out that the two pretexts for going to war with Rome were contradictory. Perhaps we need someone to point out that many of the pretexts for our preparing for war with selected countries in our day are also contradictory. Safety as a pretext for war is self-contradictory. Justice as a pretext for war is contradictory to insuring the world's supply of oil as a pretext for war. The reasons given are not the reasons which occasion the pretext. As Kim said to Hurree Babu, "Thou art here — speaking not one word of truth in ten. Why art thou here? Give a straight answer."¹

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Endnote

1. Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (Penguin Classics, 1987), chap. 12