

## The Life and Theology of Paul: Defender of the Gospel

### Review

- From his 1<sup>st</sup> encounter with the risen Jesus, Saul knew he was sent to the Gentiles (Acts 26.17).
- The New Testament uses the word ‘apostle’ in two distinct ways:
  - For those men personally commissioned by Jesus as witnesses to his resurrection (Acts 1.22). Matthias replaced Judas (Acts 1.26), James the brother of John was murdered (Acts 12.2), and James the half-brother of Jesus was added (1 Cor. 15.7, Gal. 1.19). Finally, Paul was added to this group (1 Cor. 15.8-9). Just as there were twelve (but really thirteen) tribes of Israel, so there seems to have been twelve (but really thirteen) apostles of Jesus.
  - For those men commissioned by the church for special missionary service: “they are messengers [lit. apostles] of the churches, the glory of Christ,” (2 Cor. 8.23). In this sense, Barnabas is also called an ‘apostle’ (Acts 14.4, 14).
- Barnabas and Saul’s 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey took them to Cyprus and Galatia (Acts 13-14):
  - Whenever possible, they would begin preaching in the Jewish synagogues, where they could make contact with God-seeking Gentiles and might even be given an opportunity to preach.
  - In preaching in the synagogue (Acts 13.16-41), Paul’s outline focused on:
    - 1) the *identity* of Jesus,                                  2) the *work* of Jesus,
    - 3) the *promise* through Jesus, and                  4) the *call to respond* to Jesus.
  - From Acts 13.9 forward, ‘Saul’ is known as ‘Paul.’ Although the reason is not 100% certain, it seems that the change corresponds to Paul’s stepping forward as a missionary leader.
- By the conclusion of their 1<sup>st</sup> journey, the apostles:
  - Succeeded in planting the church in 4 cities of Galatia, *and*
  - Encountered persecution from their Jewish kinsmen for their gospel preaching to Gentiles.

### The Place of Jews in the Roman Empire

- In the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman Empire, there was no separation of religion from civic life:

Today, “religion” for most Westerners designates a detached area of life, a kind of private hobby for those who like that sort of thing, separated by definition (and in some countries by law) from politics and public life, from science and technology. In Paul’s day, “religion” meant almost exactly the opposite. The Latin word *religio* has to do with “binding” things together. Worship, prayer, sacrifice, and other public rituals were designed to hold the unseen inhabitants of a city (the gods and perhaps the ancestors) together with the visible ones, the living humans, thus providing a vital framework for ordinary life, for business, marriage, travel, and home life. (Wright)
- Although ruthless when necessary, the Romans preferred to be pragmatic when possible. Knowing how serious the Jewish people were about only worshiping the God of the Bible, the Romans granted the Jewish people an exemption from participation in pagan civic ceremonies.
- In addition to this civic tension, Jewish people living in those days would have felt the ongoing pressure of their worldview: failure to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19.6) had led to Exile once before, and disloyalty now to either the Law or the Temple (cf. Acts 6.13) could result in further delay to the final fulfillment of God’s saving promises.
- For both the Romans and the Jews, therefore, it was very important for the Jews to remain a distinct and easily recognizable group. The Roman authorities wanted this for a *legal* reason – so they knew who exactly was eligible for the religious exemption. Zealous Jews wanted this for a *religious* reason – so that God would not be provoked by the disloyalty of his people.
- If there was one thing that both sides would have seen as trouble, it would be exactly what began to happen thanks to Paul and Barnabas: as Gentiles became Christians, they “turned to God from idols” (1 Th. 1.9) – abandoning the pagan civic ceremonies without becoming Jews.

### The Gentile Question

- The first apostle to evangelize Gentiles had not been Paul, but Peter (Acts 10).
- In preaching to the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius, Peter said, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him,” (Acts 10.34-35). Knowing this, and seeing the Holy Spirit fall on those who heard the word, Peter commanded these Gentiles to be baptized (Acts 10.44-48).
- However, when he returned to Jerusalem, Peter was sharply criticized by “the circumcision party” (Acts 11.2). In response to these critics, Peter simply pointed to God’s decision: “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11.17). This realization seems to have led to an uneasy peace: “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life,’” (Acts 11.18).
- Sometime after this, Peter traveled to Antioch. Paul tells the story of what happened in the letter he wrote afterwards to the churches he and Barnabas had planted: Galatians 2.11-14.
- From the fact of Paul’s letter to the Galatians – and from the controversy that is recorded for us in Acts 15 – we know that a storm was gathering in the early Christian community over a single major question: could Gentile people become Christians *without* becoming culturally Jewish?

### Sympathize Before You Criticize

- Before criticizing men like Peter and Barnabas for their hypocrisy, we should sympathize:
  - In the Ancient Near East, religion was always tied to culture and ethnicity. Before Christianity, “the idea of a single community across the traditional boundaries of culture, gender, and ethnic and social groupings was unheard of. Unthinkable, in fact,” (Wright).
  - As Gentiles began turning to Christ and abandoning pagan civic ceremonies, Jewish Christians would naturally have been very nervous: if non-Jews began claiming the same sort of exemption given only to the Jews... the Romans might simply revoke the exemption!
  - For almost everybody involved – perhaps initially even the apostle James? (Gal. 2.12) – a simple solution suggested itself: just have the Gentile Christians become culturally Jewish. This approach we now call ‘Judaizing’ (become Jewish), and its teachers ‘Judaizers.’
  - Are we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century any more immune from compromise to cultural pressures?
- For a long moment on that day in Antioch during Peter’s visit, it seems Paul alone recognized that this approach “was not in step with the truth of the gospel,” (Gal. 2.14). Why not?

### The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15.1-35)

- Though Barnabas had “blinked” for a moment during Peter’s visit, by the time “some men came down from Judea” he joined Paul in “no small dissension and debate with them,” (v. 2). Seeing the need for a consistent and final answer to this question, the church in Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to “go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question,” (v. 2). Though warmly received, the Judaizers were ready and waiting (vv. 4-5).
  - Note: This is a clear example in the New Testament of what we now call a “presbytery” or “General Assembly”: regional elders meeting to settle matters concerning the whole church.
- From the resulting discussion, we know that by this time Peter himself had taken to heart Paul’s rebuke in Antioch and pointed to evidence from his own experience with Cornelius (vv. 7-11).
- James too, whether he had supported the Judaizers previously, pointed to evidence from the prophets that foretold the awakening of “the Gentiles who are called by my name,” (vv. 13-18).
- James’ judgment (vv. 19-21), which was adopted by the council as a certified letter (vv. 23-29), settled the main point while also urging Gentile believers to show sensitivity to Jewish scruples.
- The letter’s most important line was the salutation: “to the brothers who are of the Gentiles.”