

# Paul: God's chosen vessel

David Burges

*Paul's background and upbringing helped prepare him for his preaching. He preached the same gospel as Christ, and, although preaching to the Gentiles, he always preached to the Jews first. The way he preached in different ways to different groups, in addition to the way he patiently endured much suffering and dealt with ecclesial problems, provides us with an example to follow.*

**I**N THE ROLL CALL of outstanding preachers of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, surely none stands higher than the great Apostle Paul. His charge, received from the Master, to "make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed", was performed with such diligence that he was able to claim that "from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:19).<sup>\*</sup> And to this arena can be added Rome itself, and possibly Spain as well (v. 24), so that the apostle's activities effectively spanned the first-century Roman Empire from east to west.

The catalogue of those things that Paul endured in thus fulfilling his ministry is awe-inspiring. Facing the hostile criticism of certain disciples in Corinth, the apostle compared his extraordinary experiences and sufferings for Christ with theirs:

"... with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor. 11:23-27, ESV).

And to this remarkable inventory of physical suffering the apostle adds the mental, "the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (v. 28, ESV), probably with reference to those ecclesias which had been established by Paul himself and to which most of his letters were directed.

## A chosen vessel

To write a detailed account of the life of Saul of Tarsus, who became, after his conversion, the Apostle Paul, is well beyond the scope of a single article, when, in comparison, Frederic Farrar's *The Life and Work of St. Paul* (1879) runs to around 750 pages! But it will be profitable at least to consider

the background and upbringing of the apostle, which made him uniquely fitted for the task he was given, the nature of the gospel message that he preached, and the methods he used to spread that message across the diverse tapestry of peoples in the Roman Empire.

Paul himself conveys the conviction that God had set him apart for his great work even before he was born: "But when it pleased God, Who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood . . ." (Gal. 1:15,16). In this he was closely following in the pattern of the Prophet Jeremiah, to whom God had said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). And in the same way both John the Baptist (Lk. 1:15,44) and the Lord Jesus Christ himself (Isa. 49:1,6; Lk. 1:30-35) are characterised as having been appointed to their ministries before being born.

So we must see Paul's unique circumstances as having been preordained by God in order to provide him with the necessary background for his great work. Thus, first, Paul was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5), which may well be why he was originally named Saul, after the Old Testament king of that name from the same tribe (*cf.* Acts 13:21). Furthermore, he was born into the strictest sect of Judaism, as a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5). His subsequent education in the rabbinic tradition at Jerusalem, sitting at the feet of the notable

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<sup>\*</sup> Quotations from the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

Jewish scholar Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), meant that he was thus fully versed in the Old Testament Scriptures and in all the doctrines and traditions of Judaism. Not only this, but, in accordance with Jewish tradition, he was required to learn a trade, in Paul's case tentmaking, which would enable him later to support himself in the course of his missionary journeys.

Secondly, Tarsus in Cilicia, the place of his birth, was a notable city of the Greek world, in which he would have grown up experiencing the universal Greek language and culture. Though ten miles from the sea, Tarsus had a fine harbour connected to the sea by the River Cnydus, and it is said that the city's university rivalled those of Athens and Alexandria,<sup>1</sup> although there is no evidence that Paul studied there. A number of notable scholars and poets came from Tarsus, and it is significant that Paul himself was able to quote from the words of Aratus, a Cilician poet, when preaching to the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:28). In his letters he also draws lessons from the activities of the athletes and boxers in the arena (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 2:5), thus demonstrating his familiarity with Greek society.

And thirdly, Paul was a freeborn Roman citizen, with all the privileges of access to the Roman legal system which that conveyed (Acts 22:25-29). A substantial number of Jewish families had been settled in the city of Tarsus around 170 years earlier by the Seleucid Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, and many of these were granted citizenship when Cilicia (present day southeast Turkey) became a Roman province about seventy years later.<sup>2</sup> Members of Paul's family may thus have held notable positions in Tarsian society.

Here, then, was a man uniquely qualified by upbringing, learning and experience to carry the gospel to men and women of all backgrounds. Paul could be, as he said, "all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). We can hardly doubt, too, that he possessed exceptional abilities, both physical and intellectual, to fit him for the immense task of championing a new religion across an entire empire. In all these ways was Paul indeed a vessel chosen of God for this great work.

### **Paul's gospel message**

It is arguably one of the most convincing witnesses for the truth of Christianity that the man who initially was one of its fiercest opponents and persecutors should become, through a dramatic conversion, its greatest advocate. The talents and

zeal that drove Saul the Pharisee to seek to destroy the infant Christian community were, after his life-changing encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9,13-16), redirected to the great task of bringing the saving message of Christ to the whole world. As Paul the Apostle he was now presented with a daunting challenge that the existing twelve apostles had seemingly been reluctant to face.

But what was the nature of that message and from whence did his instruction in it come? There is a view among some scholars and theologians that the Christianity of Paul was significantly different from that of the founder, Jesus Christ himself.<sup>3</sup> Some construct elaborate theories of a conflict in the early church between two factions, one following the original teachings of Christ and the other a Pauline group, which eventually came to dominate and was responsible for the selection of the books accepted into the canon of the New Testament.

However, to argue in this way denies the immense impact Paul's conversion must have had upon the man himself. Is it feasible that, having obeyed the call from the risen Christ to proclaim the gospel message to the world, he would then have consciously altered or modified that message? In fact, Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, is at pains to emphasise that the gospel that he preached was received by direct revelation from Jesus: "But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11,12).

A clear example of this is found in Paul's most characteristic doctrine, 'Justification by faith', the teaching that a man or woman, though a sinner, is counted as righteous through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, thus receiving forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life. This is a dominant theme in his preaching in Acts (for example, 13:38,39; 16:31; 20:21) and in his letters to the churches (for example, Rom. 3:21-28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:6-9). But was this a new 'Pauline' doctrine? Reference to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ spoken to Paul at his conversion shows that it was not. In the third account in Acts of their meeting on the Damascus road, Paul recalls Jesus' actual

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1. *Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands*, p. 529.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 528.
  3. See entry "Pauline Christianity", Wikipedia.

instructions to him, words that must have been indelibly impressed upon his memory: "But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you . . . to open [the Gentiles] eyes . . . that they may receive *forgiveness of sins* and an inheritance among those who are *sanctified by faith in me*" (Acts 26:16-18).

Hence Paul's key doctrine came straight from the lips of Jesus himself, and is confirmed by other sayings of the Master recorded in the Gospels. For instance, when Jesus encountered the woman who washed his feet with her penitent tears, he first declared, "Your sins are *forgiven*", and then, "Your *faith* has saved you. Go in peace" (Lk. 7:48,50). Likewise, in his conversation with Martha over the death of Lazarus, he assured her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who *believes [has faith]* in me, though he may die, he shall live" (Jno. 11:25).

Further confirmation of this founding principle of the gospel came from Paul's new understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures and the role of faith in the life of Abraham, of whom it was recorded that "he *believed* in the LORD, and He *accounted* it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). But both Peter (1 Pet. 1:5,7,9) and James (Jas. 2:21-24) in different ways also stress the importance of faith for salvation, so that no significant divide is discernible between them. We can, then, be in no doubt that the gospel preached by Paul was fully the authentic message of salvation from the founder, the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And it is the same gospel that we aspire to proclaim today.

### **The Jewish problem**

It is, however, true that the early church was sadly divided over a vital issue, and that Paul was on one side and many of the Jewish believers on the other. That issue was the continuing status of the Law of Moses, and whether Gentiles should be required to undergo circumcision and keep the provisions of that Law. Paul, though coming from the most traditional strand of Judaism himself, clearly saw that the old covenant had been superseded by the new, the Law by grace. Here again, Paul and the other apostles are found to be in harmony over the issue and the way it was to be resolved. The record of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 demonstrates how unity was achieved through the testimony of Paul and Barnabas about the dynamic spread of the gospel

among the Gentiles, and the wise counsel of Peter and James. We find no attempt by Paul to go his own way or lead away a faction, but always to achieve a consensus.

It is distressing to note, however, that the issue was never to go away. Paul was clearly prepared to go as far as possible to accommodate the Jews who found it difficult to accept the change. But throughout his ministry we find him opposed and hounded by unnamed Jews, from either the synagogue or the ecclesia, seeking to frustrate his work and to impose circumcision and observance of the Law upon the Gentile believers. To these he makes frequent oblique references in his letters (for example, 2 Cor. 11:22,26; Gal. 2:3-5; 5:11; 6:12,13; 1 Thess. 2:14-16), warning against their influence.

### **Paul as preacher**

Following his conversion, Paul lost no time in beginning to preach in Damascus that Jesus is Christ (Acts 9:20). Subsequently he made a bold but unsuccessful attempt to do the same at Jerusalem (vv. 28,29), before returning for a period to his home in Tarsus (v. 30). Although we have no record of his time there, we cannot doubt that he would have been active in obeying his Lord's command to preach, particularly among his own family and former associates in the community. It was, however, through the insight of Barnabas that Paul, destined for a far greater role, was brought from Tarsus to join the growing, mainly Gentile, ecclesia at Syrian Antioch (11:25,26).

It is important to notice that, when setting out on the first of his missionary journeys, Paul went with the full backing and the blessing of the ecclesia at Antioch. Correspondingly, on his return he gave a full report to the members at the conclusion of his journey (Acts 13:1-3; 14:26,27). Even though endowed with the authority of an apostle, he consistently behaved as a regular member of the body, involving it as fully as possible in his great work of spreading the gospel.

In every place that Paul visited a clear pattern emerges. His first appeal would be to the Jews of the synagogue (for example, Acts 17:2, "as his custom was"), the result of which was usually to arouse some form of hostility and opposition. After that he would shift his attention to the Gentiles, preaching both in the streets and markets, and also in suitable hired premises, where he could teach and develop the understanding of those who responded. On entering a new area, Paul would move systematically through the towns

### Summary of The Antioch Speech

- God's unfailing care for Israel (based on Old Testament Scriptures)
- Promises to David fulfilled in Jesus
- John the Baptist's witness to Jesus
- Jesus' unjust execution by rulers
- Promises confirmed by his resurrection
- Forgiveness of sins (justification) comes by faith
- There is a judgement to come.

### Summary of the Athens Speech

- They worshipped the 'Unknown God'
- The true God, the Creator, is not found in man-made temples
- He has made all men (as Greek poets recognised)
- God is not represented by idols
- He commands all men to repent
- There is a coming day of judgement
- The resurrection of Jesus is God's assurance.

and villages, seeking a response, moving on if there were none and staying for a period when there was. In this he was following the pattern of his Master, as Luke records (*cp.* Lk. 8:1 with Acts 17:1, where the same Greek word *diodeuo*, 'to pass through', is used, the only two occurrences).

We should recognise that, although Paul's gospel was the authentic gospel of Christ, as outlined above, yet the *presentation* of the message was clearly tailored to the abilities and understanding of the audience: "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews . . . to those who are without law, as without law . . . that I might win those who are without law" (1 Cor. 9:20,21). In preaching to Jews, Paul could use the full range of Old Testament passages and prophecies concerning the Kingdom of God and the work of Messiah. In particular, he could follow the example of Stephen (Acts 7) in using the history of Israel's resistance to God's ways to urge repentance on his countrymen.

On the other hand, for Greeks it was necessary to familiarise them with the Creator, the God of Israel and His plan for the nations, before introducing the role of the Saviour. This is clearly seen by comparing two keynote speeches of the apostle recorded in Acts (see box above), the first to Jews in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41) and the second to the philosophers at Athens (17:22-31). This tailoring of the *presentation* of the gospel is especially relevant for preachers today, in a society that, like that of Athens, is profoundly ignorant of the Word of God. Unfortunately, much of our preaching still uses language and terminol-

ogy from an earlier era, which is foreign to hearers today and fails to appreciate that many do not even know the meaning of the word 'gospel' (*cf.* Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14:11,16)!

### Paul our example

On several occasions the Apostle Paul urges us to be 'imitators' of him; for instance: "Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern" (Phil. 3:17). No doubt this applies to all aspects of the life in Christ, but it certainly includes our obligation to bear witness to others of the faith we have come to share.

We should be inspired by the extraordinary spirit of endurance he displayed. Can we forget the example of Paul with Silas at Philippi, who, having been beaten with many stripes and secured in the inner prison, nevertheless "were praying and singing hymns to God" (Acts 16:23-25), when they might have sat mute and resentful in the darkness, "and the prisoners were listening to them"? Thus, even in adversity, witness was made to the grace of God and the hope of salvation in Christ. May each of us, in our own limited circumstances, seek to follow the supreme example of the apostle, so that ultimately *his* last testament may apply to *us* too: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7,8).

Where men's faith is weak, and their minds are full of uncertainty, and they are conscious that their own deeds will not bear the light, you will find them full of 'charity', and sensitively fearful of the Truth being too plainly spoken.

Brother J. Thomas, cited in Ron Abel, *The Man of Sin*, p. 89