

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
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THE APOSTLE PAUL AND THE CALL OF GOD

What kind of man was the Apostle Paul? We discover from texts like 2 Corinthians 10:10 that he was not impressive in personal appearance nor speech. There is a hint in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 and Galatians 4:13 that he was afflicted with some sort of physical disability.¹ He was, by his own admission, possessed by a superabundance of zeal, both before his conversion and after as well (cf. Galatians 1:14; 2 Corinthians 11:23, 24) – the zeal which drove him to persecute the church he later continued to show as a builder of what he once tried to destroy. His missionary zeal is unmatched in the pages of the New Testament. He appears to have been a man who was very sociable and gregarious. “The range of his friendship and the warmth of his affection are qualities which no attentive reader of his letters can miss. There are scores of people mentioned in the New Testament who are known to us, by name at least, simply because they were friends of Paul.”² There is also a tenderness about him which is sometimes not appreciated. He refers to the wayward Galatians as “my little children” (Galatians 4:9). The Corinthians, who had deprecated the Apostle because of his appearance and speech, are also called “my children” (2 Corinthians 6:13), and Paul is willing to spend all that he has for them (2 Corinthians 2:14-18). His love for his fellow Jews is seen in passages like Romans 9:3. A glance at these texts should dispel once and for all the thought that Paul was a mean-spirited, cold-hearted intellectual who was obsessed with his own self-importance. It is still fairly common to hear people crying the old liberal slogan, “Away from Paul and back to Jesus.” The idea here is that Paul gives us the Christ of dogma as opposed to the Jesus of the Gospels.³ Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States and the pen behind the Declaration of Independence, was of this opinion. Speaking of the disciples in general, Jefferson wrote, “of this band of dupes and impostaers, Paul was the great Coryphaeus, and the *first corruptor of the doctrines of Jesus.*”⁴ B. B. Warfield relates an interesting story that is contained in Luther’s *Table Talk* (1538): “There was a certain cardinal in the beginning of the Gospel plotting many things against me in Rome. A court fool, looking on, is said to have remarked: *My Lord, take my advice and first depose Paul from the company of the Apostles; it is he who is giving us all this trouble.*”⁵

- I. **PAUL’S ARGUMENT: MY GOSPEL IS FROM GOD.** Paul has stated that his authority as an apostle is from God (1:1) and that there is only one Gospel – his. Was Paul’s Gospel simply the product of his own fertile brain? Did he make it up? In this section he will argue that his Gospel is not derived from man. It comes directly from God.
 - A. **What It Is Not** (1:11-12). The expression “I want you to know” (NIV) suggests a somewhat formal or solemn assertion (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3; 15:1; 2 Corinthians 8:1; Ephesians 1:9).⁶ This is significant because what follows is in effect the proposition that proves the whole argument that runs from 1:13 to 2:21. His Gospel was not given him by any human agency. Harmon helpfully points out, “This thesis statement consists of a statement introduced with a disclosure formula (*I want you to know*) about the divine origin of Paul’s gospel message (1:11), followed by an explanatory statement denying its human origins and asserting its divine origin (1:12). As such it closely parallels 1:1, where Paul made similar denials and assertions about the origin of his status

as an apostle.”⁷ Notice also that he underscores the point that *this* Gospel was what he preached to them. The Galatians did hear the true Gospel and Paul’s words are, in some sense, a scolding.

B. **What It Is** (1:12). Paul’s Gospel came to him “by revelation from Jesus Christ.” The word *revelation*, *apokalupsis*, means an unveiling of something previously unknown and secret. It is an announcement from God of something that lies beyond human reach. “It assumes, often, not merely a manifestation, a disclosing in the objective sense, but also an influencing of the human spirit in such a way that it can distinguish the divine revelation as being such (cf. Matthew 16:17).”⁸ This revelation was⁸ This revelation was *by* Jesus Christ, and it *concerned* this Person and Work (1:16). The sum and substance of Paul’s theology finds its origin in this revelation.⁹

II. **PROOF ONE: PAUL’S LIFE BEFORE CONVERSION.** Paul is seeking to establish his independence from the Twelve Apostles in order to demonstrate that *they* were not his teachers and that his Gospel came from God, not from men.

A. **The Persecutor of the Church** (cf. Acts 8:3; 9:21). Paul was a zealot (cf. Philippians 3:5-6; Acts 22:3). His zeal for the Law was reflected in his persecution of Christians, and the Christians in Jerusalem were his chief targets (Acts 8:3).

B. **The Top of His Class in Jerusalem.** Paul’s zeal for the Law is also evidenced by his dedication as a student. He excelled. His passion for the Law was matched only by his intolerance for the Christian church.

III. **PROOF TWO: PAUL’S LIFE AT CONVERSION.** “No human explanation or influence could account for the 180 degree turnaround in Saul’s life.”¹⁰

A. **A Separation** (1:15). The word “but” introduces a dramatic contrast between Paul’s past and his conversion. A striking transformation takes place, and this Paul attributes to God’s sovereignty. It was God “who set me apart.” And when did this occur? “From my mother’s womb.” This expression is temporal, and it means *from the time of*. In other words, before Paul was born, God had marked him out. This is reinforced by the word “called,” a term in Paul’s vocabulary that expresses effectual and invincible grace (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; Romans 8:29; 9:12).

B. **A Revelation** (1:16). This is the third stage as expressed in the clause “to reveal His Son in me.” This was a personal revelation. It has two aspects. There was the external unveiling of the risen Christ (Acts 9:1-9) accompanied by an intimate internal revelation of the knowledge of the glory of the Son of God (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8-9).

C. **A Vocation.** The revelation was made so that Paul might *preach* Christ to the nations (cf. 2 Timothy 4:17). Note that immediately after this Paul went not to Jerusalem but into Arabia.

IV. **PROOF THREE: PAUL’S LIFE AFTER CONVERSION.** Three years pass before Paul appears in Jerusalem. What was he doing during this time? I am inclined to believe he was going through a period of spiritual readjustment. He had to rethink his understanding of the Scriptures.

A. **The Visit to Jerusalem.** The point Paul is making is simple. He was totally isolated during this period from the Apostles in Jerusalem. Furthermore, he saw only Peter and James and stayed only fifteen days.

B. **The Time in Syria and Cilicia** (1:21-24). This period is mentioned in Acts 9:30. Here he remained for many years. In fact, he was totally unknown to the churches in Judea. All that they had heard was that the one-time persecutor of the faith now is preaching that same faith. If, in fact, the Judaizers were from the churches in Judea, they would have known this. Leon Morris tells us the expression *only they heard* “introduces a report that was evidently widely circulated among the churches. The periphrastic tense indicates a continuing activity: *they kept hearing*. This seems to

imply that during his years in Syria and Cilicia (1:21) he continued to preach the gospel. Paul is not mentioned by name at this point but is characterized by his deeds. Formerly he was a persecutor, but now he is a preacher. The verb means *preaches the gospel*, so Paul is combining the thoughts of *good news* and *faith*. He is bringing good news to those who hear him preach, and the content of his sermons makes it clear that they must have faith, that is, they must put their trust in Jesus. But we should not overlook the definite article: *the faith*. Paul in those days was not so much persecuting individual believers as trying to destroy *the faith*, *i.e.*, the church. This use of *the faith* shows the emphasis placed on faith from the earliest times. The result of his preaching was that the hearers *glorified God in Paul*. The use of the imperfect tense seems to imply that the preaching and the glorifying went on continually. The miraculous change from persecutor to preacher was more effective than many sermons. Paul demonstrated in his life the power of the gospel. As Lenski puts it, *By a simply recounting of the historical facts Paul sets before the Galatians what they should never have allowed anyone to make them doubt: he had his gospel directly from God and Christ, by revelation and not at secondhand, the identical gospel of all the other apostles, of all the churches in Judea.*¹¹

CONCLUSION: What is Paul's point in all of this? Since his Gospel is from God, and since Paul declares that salvation is to be had by grace through faith only, then there is no other Gospel. All other so-called Gospels are false.

ENDNOTES

¹ The speculation as to the exact nature of Paul's affliction would make a lengthy list. The most common is that he had some kind of eye disease, or that it was chronic malaria. Cf. Wm. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul: The Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (rpt. Baker, 1962), p. 94f. Among the more ridiculous proposals are those of Charles and Frances Hunter, who contend that Paul's thorn in the flesh was obesity and Paul's greatest struggle was with his weight! Cf. *God's Answer to Fat . . . LOSE IT!* (Hunter Books, 1975). Even more absurd is the position of Charismatic extremist Kenneth Copeland, who argues that the "thorn in the flesh" was not some physical ailment at all. Since Copeland advocates the heresy that Christians with strong faith should never be sick (along with being wealthy), he has to dismiss anything in the Bible that would teach otherwise.

² F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 457.

³ Professed evangelical Robert Schuller echoes this liberal line by stating that the words of Jesus are safer ground on which to build one's ministry than the writings of the apostle Paul; cf. *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Word, 1982), p. 39.

⁴ Letter to W. Short, 1820, cited by S. L. Johnson, *Galatians: Believers Bible Bulletin* (Believers Chapel, 1978), No. 3, p. 1.

⁵ *The Works of B. B. Warfield IX: Studies in Theology* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 478.

⁶ E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (T&T Clark, 1977), p. 35. The verb "to make known," *gnōrizō*, is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) and in the New Testament, of immediate proclamations of the divine will. Cf. R.Y.K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 51.

⁷ M. S. Harmon, *Galatians: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Lexham Academic, 2021), p. 55.

⁸ H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Eerdmans, 1953), p. 59.

⁹ Paul was no doubt aware of the details of the crucifixion of Jesus, "But the bare facts about Jesus did not constitute a gospel." J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (MacMillan, 1928), p. 76.

¹⁰ J. MacArthur, Jr., *Galatians: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Moody, 1987), p. 27.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (IVP, 1996), p. 61.