

The Importance of Paul's Evidence

by F.F Bruce

F.F. Bruce discusses the profound impact of Paul's conversion and his contributions to early Christianity through his letters and teachings.

Scripture: Luke 22:27, Romans 13:14, 1 Corinthians 15:3, Galatians 1:13, Philippians 2:7

Topics: "Apostle Paul", "Christian Apologetics"

Description

F.F. Bruce delves into the life and conversion of the apostle Paul, a Roman citizen of Jewish birth who zealously persecuted early Christians until his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus transformed him into a chief herald of the Christian faith. Paul's conversion has been considered a powerful evidence for the truth of Christianity. Through Paul's Epistles, we gain insight into the early apostolic preaching about Jesus, emphasizing His divine preexistence, humanity, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and appearances to many eyewitnesses.

Transcript

The earliest of the New Testament writings, as they have come down to us, are the letters written by the apostle Paul up to the time of his detention in Rome (c. AD 60-62). The earliest of our Gospels in its present form can probably not be dated earlier than AD 60, but from the hand of Paul we have ten Epistles written between 48 and 60. This man Paul was a Roman citizen of Jewish birth (his Jewish name was Saul), born somewhere about the commencement of the Christian era in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, Asia Minor. His birthplace, 'no mean city', as he said himself (Acts xxi. 39) was in those days an eminent centre of Greek culture, which did not fail to leave its mark on Paul, as may be seen in his speeches and letters. He received an education in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, the greatest Rabbi of his day and a leader of the party of the Pharisees. He rapidly attained distinction among his contemporaries by the diligence of his studies and the fervour with which he upheld the ancestral traditions of the Jewish nation.' He may even -though this is uncertain- have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the nation. This zeal for the law brought him into conflict with the early Jerusalem Christians, especially with those who belonged to the circle of Stephen, whose teaching he must have heard in the synagogue where the Cilician Jews met' and who early realized, with exceptionally farsighted comprehension, that the gospel cut at the roots of the traditional Jewish ceremonial law and culture.

At the stoning of Stephen, we find Paul playing a responsible part and giving his consent to his death, and thereafter proceeding to uproot the new movement which, in his eyes, stood revealed by Stephen's activity

as a deadly threat to all that he counted dear in Judaism. To use his own words, 'Beyond all measure I persecuted the Church of God and harried it' (see Gal. i. 13) until his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus convinced his mind and conscience of the reality of His resurrection, and therewith of the validity of the Christians' claims, whereupon he became the chief herald of the faith of which he formerly made havoc.

It is reasonable to believe that the evidence which convinced such a man of the outandout wrongness of his former course, and led him so decisively to abandon previously cherished beliefs for a movement which he had so vigorously opposed, must have been of a singularly impressive quality. The conversion of Paul has for long been regarded as a weighty evidence for the truth of Christianity. Many have endorsed the conclusion of the eighteenth century statesman George, Lord Lyttelton, that 'the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation'.

Here, however, we are chiefly concerned with the information we can derive from his Epistles. These were not written to record the facts of the life and ministry of Jesus; they were addressed to Christians, who already knew the gospel story. Yet in them we can find sufficient material to construct an outline of the early apostolic preaching about Jesus. While Paul insists on the divine preexistence of Jesus, yet he knows that He was none the less a real human being, a descendant of Abraham and David, who lived under the Jewish law; who was betrayed, and on the night of His betrayal instituted a memorial meal of bread and wine; who endured the Roman penalty of crucifixion, although the responsibility for His death is laid at the door of the representatives of the Jewish nation; who was 'buried, rose the third day, and was thereafter seen alive by many eyewitnesses on various occasions, including one occasion on which He was so seen by over five hundred at once, of whom the majority were alive nearly twenty-five years later.' In this summary of the evidence for the reality of Christ's resurrection, Paul shows a sound instinct for the necessity of marshaling personal testimony in support of what might well appear an incredible assertion.

Paul knows of the Lord's apostles, of whom Peter and John are mentioned by name as 'pillars' of the Jerusalem community, and of His brothers, of whom James is similarly mentioned. He knows that the Lord's brothers and apostles, including Peter, were married -an incidental agreement with the Gospel story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law." He quotes sayings of Jesus on occasion-e.g., His teaching on marriage and divorce,' and on the right of gospel preachers to have their material needs supplied; and the words He used at the institution of the Lord's Supper.'

Even where he does not quote the actual sayings of Jesus, he shows throughout his works how well acquainted he was with them. In particular, we ought to compare the ethical section of the Epistle to the Romans (xii. 1 to xv. 7), where Paul summarizes the practical implications of the gospel for the lives of believers, with the Sermon on the Mount, to see how thoroughly imbued the apostle was with the teaching of his Master. Besides, there and elsewhere Paul's chief argument in his ethical instruction is the example of Christ Himself. And the character of Christ as understood by Paul is in perfect agreement with His character as portrayed in the Gospels. When Paul speaks of 'the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (2 Cor. x. 1), we remember our Lord's own words, 'I am meek and lowly in heart' (Mt. xi. 29). The self-denying Christ of the Gospels is the one of whom Paul says, 'Even Christ pleased not himself' (Rom. xv. 3); and just as the Christ of the Gospels called on His followers to deny themselves (Mk. viii. 34), so the apostle insists that, after the example of Christ Himself, it is our Christian duty 'to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves' (Rom. xv. 1). He who said: 'I am among you as the servant (Lk. xxii. 27), and performed the menial task of washing His disciples' feet (Jn. xiii. 4 ff.)' is He who, according to Paul, 'took

the form of a slave' (Phil. 11. 7). In a word, when Paul wishes to commend to his readers all those moral graces which adorn the Christ of the Gospels he does so in language like this: 'Put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. xiii. 14).

In short, the outline of the gospel story as we can trace it in the writings of Paul agrees with the outline which we find elsewhere in the New Testament, and in the four Gospels in particular. Paul himself is at pains to point out that the gospel which he preached was one and the same gospel as that preached by the other apostles!-a striking claim, considering that Paul was neither a companion of Christ in the days of His flesh nor of the original apostles, and that he vigorously asserts his complete independence of these.'

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