

1. Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles (4Q 2011—Galatians)

Biblical material: Acts 6:9–15, 9:1–9, 1 Sam. 16:7, Matt. 7:1, Acts 11:19–21, 15:1–5.

Quotes

- Christ had given the apostles a world-wide commission, embracing all the nations; but intellectually they did not understand what He meant. They found that out as they followed the impulse of the Spirit. *Roland Allen*
- If you are apostles at all, you are apostles, not of men, nor by man. Your sufficiency is of God. *Joseph Barber Lightfoot*
- Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me. *St. Patrick*

Questions

Why is Paul's role in working for the Gentiles so important? In what way do we learn lessons for us today? How does an understanding of Paul's mission to the Gentiles help us understand the issues in the great controversy and how God is working these issues through to their eventual conclusion? What part do we play?

Bible summary

Acts 6:9–15 details the background and substance to the accusations made against Stephen. There then follows his response and martyrdom. Paul is recorded as agreeing with his execution (Acts 8:1). In 9:1–9 Paul's conversion is detailed, and the doubts of the Christian community as to the validity of Paul's experience. However, 1 Sam. 16:7 reminds us that God looks at the heart, and Matt. 7:1 Jesus' words about not judging others. Acts 11:19–21 reveals the beginnings of Paul's ministry (being found by Barnabas in Tarsus where he'd been sent by the believers in Jerusalem [Acts 9:30]). The issues of converted Gentiles really ignited in Antioch where Paul was working with Barnabas and they traveled to Jerusalem to discuss the matter (Acts 15:1-5). This whole issue of Gentile converts and what requirements should be placed on them plagued the Early Church for a long time and is the background to much of what Paul wrote.

Comment

At first sight, Paul's commission to work for the Gentiles is very surprising. He himself admits he was a 'Pharisee of the Pharisees,' with all that this implies. So it must have been very difficult for him to accept, as a very rigorous law-keeping Jew, that the message of the gospel was to go to the Gentiles as well...

When Saul-who-became-Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road, he had many decisions to make, many ideas to change, and much to learn. (That's why he spent time in Arabia, far away from Jerusalem). He needed to work through the implications of this 'paradigm shift.' Most of all, this was a radical change in his picture of God. Instead of seeing a God who would delight in his persecution of Christians, he came to know the true God as revealed by Jesus.

But as for so many of us, he had to spend a long time thinking this through—and unlearning many ideas about God that he had been taught. Only then could he be a true

‘ambassador for Christ.’ For while he was previously very ‘zealous for God’ (Acts 22:3), he was zealous for the ‘god’ as portrayed by the adversary. This is a cautionary note for all of us—we may be very missionary minded, as was Saul before his conversion, but zeal and enthusiasm does not always correlate with truth!

As we think of Paul’s experience, and the experience of hostility from his fellow-Jews, it’s perhaps not surprising that it should become the clearer to Paul that the gospel was to go to the Gentiles as well. This really was a seismic shift in perspective—the more so for a ‘Pharisee of the Pharisees’! But in the end he concludes “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” Acts 28:28 NIV.

Interestingly, the people living in Galatia were not Greeks, but a Celtic people—so for many, perhaps the majority, Paul’s epistle would have been translated for them. Their language was related to Gaulish, the language of the country of Gaul before it was conquered by Rome. It would have borne similarities to the Celtic languages of Irish, Welsh, and Gaelic.

We often think of the world in which the early church began as being made up primarily of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. This epistle reminds us of the very different peoples and their backgrounds that the early Christians had to address. The religion of the Celtic peoples was not the same as the Greeks or the Romans. In fact Patrick had to deal with what surely must have been a similar kind of religious background as he worked for the Celtic people of Ireland. Bearing this in mind can help us as we try to understand the message of the epistle to the Galatians, and its relevance to us today.

Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles needed to understand the various Gentile peoples he wanted to reach, and make sure the message was relevant and understandable. This approach reveals the fundamental aspects of witness: the basic beliefs are unchanged, but the way in which they are expressed are determined by language and culture so that the good news can be embraced by different people with different backgrounds. This is why Galatians is such a helpful book for us today as we seek to share the good news of God with as many different people as we can.

Ellen White Comments

Paul speaks of the riches of the glory of the mystery that is to be made known to the Gentiles. There are many mysteries in the word of God that we do not comprehend, and many of us are content to stop our investigation when we have just begun to receive a little knowledge concerning Christ. When there begins to be a little unfolding of the divine purposes to the mind, and we begin to obtain a slight knowledge of the character of God, we become satisfied, and think that we have received about all the light that there is for us in the word of God. But the truth of God is infinite. With painstaking effort, we should work in the mines of truth, discovering the precious jewels that have been hidden. It is the laborer’s privilege to have a constant supply of fresh truth for the people. He should be in such a position that he can bring from the treasure house of God, not the same thing over and over, but new beauty and new truth. {GW92 389-90}

The life of Christ is a perfect revelation of the character of God. What then is our duty? Paul tells us. Christ revealed Himself to Paul as he was persecuting the saints, and the apostle declares. “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” Henceforth his one desire was to preach Christ and Him crucified. {Central Advance, April 8, 1903}

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