

The Year of St. Paul



The Early Years of Paul and his First Missionary Journey

It didn't take Paul long to find the words of the Lord being fulfilled, realized in his own life ("*...and I will show what he will have to suffer in my name.*" Acts 9:16). His first encounters with preaching are in Damascus and Jerusalem. Both are confrontations from and by Jews, the second includes the early Church which he had been persecuting. This confrontation was with its leaders as well as the community. In Damascus he was lowered over the city walls in a basket (Acts. 9:25). In Jerusalem, the Hellenists (traditional immigrant Jews) led the attacks before the disciples sent him to safety in Caesarea and then to Tarsus.

Ultimately, Barnabas would seek out Paul to assist him in the ministry in Antioch, which would become a leading Christian center along with Jerusalem. This is the first place where disciples were called Christians. Barnabas and Paul also began relief work in providing assistance to the Church in Jerusalem, suffering from a famine. It is here that we have a first-hand account of the ministry including social concerns for all.

The First Missionary Journey: AD 46-49

Making this first missionary journey were Barnabas, Paul, and John, also known as Mark. Their travels on this first journey went something like this: Seleucia to Cyprus, Salamis, and to the other end of the island to Paphos. They sailed from here to Perga in Pamphylia (where John left them and returned to Jerusalem), and finally arrived in Antioch in Pisidia.

We're told that in Antioch many Jews were greatly interested in the words spoken by Paul and Barnabas. However, Gentiles rapidly gathered to hear their witness of faith, and began to believe. This caused enormous jealousy among the Jews who sought to have Paul and Barnabas removed from the city. Therefore, they moved on to Iconium.

Again, after initial success in preaching to both Jews and Gentiles, opposition mounted through those who did not believe. After a lengthy stay there was a building effort to have Paul and Barnabas stoned. They left Iconium, fleeing to Lystra and Derbe. In Lystra the healing of a crippled man was cause for the people to believe that gods had come to live with them. They called Barnabas "Zeus" and Paul "Hermes" since he was the chief speaker. Even

the chief priests of the pagan temples came to offer animal sacrifices to them. Soon enough, as is always the case, people from Antioch and Iconium arrived and stirred the crowds with their own disbelief. Here Paul is stoned and believed dead. However, "*when the disciples gathered around him, he got up and entered the city.*" (Acts 14:20).

The next day Paul and Barnabas left Lystra for Derbe.

The work of Paul and Barnabas,

even though it sounds like there was great opposition, must have been extremely fruitful as they retraced their journey, stopping in all the cities previously visited and strengthening the many believers. In Antioch the question of circumcision of the Gentile converts arose. Paul and Barnabas, and other leaders were sent by the Church to Jerusalem.

They traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria en route to Jerusalem, telling all of the great number of conversions seen among the Gentiles. And the Church rejoiced! In Jerusalem, when the disciples met, there was great discussion. Peter, having struggled with the Lord concerning what is clean and unclean meat, would quickly be found supportive of changing the law of circumcision among non-Jewish converts, as would Paul concerning Peter's defense. James, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem and presiding over this conference, would make the final decree that all would soon ratify.

For Consideration

In reading these chapters of the Acts of the Apostles (Chpt. 9-15), we are constantly reminded of the notion of "*being sent*" or "*approved by the apostles and Presbyters.*" With no email, or even snail mail, this had to take considerable time. *Often we think the Church moves slowly today. But we must always consider that, like the early Church, what is decided must take into account the whole of the Church. This is no easy resolve. Those active in the life of the Church, even in a local parish, can, or should recognize the dissemination of information, and actions taken for the betterment of the whole, can be difficult to achieve, and equally difficult to implement.*

The directives of where an individual or pair were to go were

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always given only after prayer of the whole council, and their departure was always after fasting and prayer, usually including the laying on of hands asking the guidance of the Lord's Spirit.

We see how persecution must always be considered part of the mission. No one can proclaim Jesus Christ and the love of the Father without expecting resentment, confrontation, and rejection. For some this can include physical abuse and perhaps torture. It is not foreign to our culture or the many cultures of the world. Even within our own families there can be hostility about practicing the faith or the need to arrange activities around times of worship and prayer. Convenience is not a word associated with ministry, especially evangelization, which is exactly what was constantly occurring among the believers of the early Church in all these cities. Jealousy and resentment live even today.

Finally, we see in the growing Church the need to change laws followed from the Jewish tradition since they were not meaningful for the Gentile converts. Even here we see the early Church growing in its understanding that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law, and supersedes, as it were, the law of Moses with the law of love. Defilement and recognition were the basic reasons for the old law. Now believers were called "to put on Christ" and take on the mantle of salvation. So laws can change when the whole Church is in accord and when proper growth is realized among the people.

The changes from requirement to abstain from meat on all Fridays of the year, and the ability to celebrate Mass Saturday evening in fulfillment of our Sunday obligation were changes because of cultural differences similar to what Peter and Paul found necessary in the early years of the Church. It should be noted that the Church today asks believers to set aside a day of fasting and abstinence each week, showing a sign of willful participation in the need to give over ourselves and focus more intently on the Lord. These are signs of mature Christian response.

Notes

There is conflict in understanding Luke in the Acts of the Apostles concerning the amount of time Paul spent in Damascus before his preaching and/or before his leaving Damascus for Jerusalem. Nevertheless, we know that approximately three years were spent in Paul learning the faith one-on-one as it were, with Church leaders. This is a good reminder for us that the faith is never known in its entirety.

There are dates in the Acts of the Apostles that are

not always in alignment with dates found in Paul's letters. We need to remember that history is not the most critical event for Paul. His message is salvation. And Luke is more concerned with showing the growth of the Church, and supporting ongoing growth rather than an historical accuracy concerning time.

Paul preached only in cities with a synagogue as he believed that Christ was the fulfillment of the promise of God, the completion of salvation, of his Jewish faith. He did not wish to start a new religion anymore than any of the apostles desired for this. However, because their message of Jesus Christ was not received, because they were banned from living their faith in the synagogues, and because there were such great numbers of believers among the Gentiles, their faith was separate from the Jews.

Personal Accounting

We read of Barnabas and Paul, and brief accounts of John (Mark), Peter, and James. Each has his role in the Church. Can we ask ourselves:

What is my role that needs fulfilled in the building up of the Church today?

How am I called to be an evangelist in where I live and in how I live?

Do I pray about what God asks of me as did the first of all Christians?

The welcomes received by Paul and Barnabas did not last long in most cities visited in this first missionary journey. What can I do to help new people in my neighborhood feel welcomed until they feel a part of the community? The parish?