

Paul: A Man Misunderstood

By Peter Barnes

We are all prone to plead that we have been understood, but the apostle Paul was in reality a man much misunderstood. The word 'nuanced' can be a weasel word, but Paul did possess a nuanced mind. He could claim the right to be paid for his labours as an apostle, while yet refusing to take payment (1 Cor.9:1-18); he was prepared to circumcise Timothy in order that he might be able to preach to Jews (Acts 16:3) but woe betide anyone who claimed that circumcision was needed for salvation (Gal.5:2,4); and he could express his gratitude to the Philippians for their gift to him while trying to make it clear that he was not after financial support (Phil.4:10-20).

Paul's teaching that the law cannot save us led some of his hearers to draw wrong conclusions: 'And why not do evil that good may come? – as some people slanderously charge us with saying.' Yet he remained unmoved at such a misrepresentation of the gospel of grace: 'Their condemnation is just' (Rom.3:8). No one would misrepresent the Pharisee in the temple who praised his own goodness of holding to God's free forgiveness as his hope of everlasting life (Luke 18:9-14). But someone determined on mischief could make that claim about Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, John Newton, Charles Spurgeon, and the whole faithful evangelical witness down through the ages.

Yet to placate the Jews who believed that he had declared war on Moses, Paul purified himself, paid the expenses of four who had taken a vow, and witnessed the offering he had paid for being presented for each of them (Acts 21:17-26). Most of us might find that difficult to comprehend, let alone do, but Paul could be sympathetic to all cultural baggage, provided it was not confused with the gospel.

The apostolic capacity for performing miracles led many in

Lystra to think that he was the messenger god, Hermes, come down to earth, while Barnabas – presumably a much bigger man – was Zeus (Acts 14:8-18). It was only with some difficulty that Paul and Barnabas managed to convince the people not to offer sacrifices to them. Later, on Malta, he was first mistaken for a murderer who was receiving his karma, as it were, when he was bitten by a viper. Soon after, when he had not dropped dead, he was thought to be a god (Acts 28:1-6).

Paul's concentration on preaching the gospel rather than baptizing (although he did baptize) probably contributed to some Corinthians believing that he was only one leader among a number, and could be relegated to comparative insignificance if one so desired (1 Cor.1:10-17). His hesitation to publicise his vision of the third heaven and his long list of sufferings meant that those who favoured a kind of health and wealth gospel of signs could present him as a weakling who did not really enjoy the favour of God (2 Cor.11-12). His comparative isolation from the apostles in Jerusalem also seems to have led some to think he was not quite a genuine apostle (Gal.1).

The gospel message carries its own dangers: 'Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?' (Gal.4:16) The quick Galatian desertion of Paul was part of a beguiling presentation by Judaizers that Paul was not preaching a full gospel (Gal.1:6-7). To the sinner without the Holy Spirit, the grace of Christ can never be enough!

By changing his plans, Paul found himself on the back foot with the Corinthians (2 Cor.1:12-2:4). Their reading of him was that his word was unreliable; the reality was that his love for them meant he wanted to spare them. When he took a strong line about Christians' not associating with sexually immoral

people, he was misunderstood to mean that Christians had to leave all civil society (1 Cor.5:9-11). Probably there was ill-will behind this misunderstanding. Those who search for something to be offended at or to mock usually manage to find what they are looking for. His teaching on the second coming was also distorted by some to justify giving up work because there was no point to it (see 2 Thess.3:6-12).

In all this, Paul lived a life of faith, hope and love. The misunderstandings of friends and foes ought not to cause us to deviate from that goal.

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