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Paul's ministry, a struggle against heathenism

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Thesis.

Paul's Ministry, a Struggle Against Heathenism.

When I read my Testament, I am struck with a peculiarity. The Gospels speak of Peter and of James and of John and of their life with Christ the great Teacher. And yet when we look at the books of the latter part of the Testament there is a marked preponderance of the writings of one who, perhaps, never saw the Master before the resurrection and at least was an enemy to him for some time after that event. We have general epistles by each of the favored disciples, but Paul has written those letters so replete with instruction which owes its value largely to the fact that it was written to some person or church, a church with which he was acquainted, in which sin must be corrected, faithfulness commended and laxness changed to earnestness by exhortation.

This fact suggests the inquiry, Why is it so? Did not those disciples imbibe that spirit of Christ which included the whole world under the plan of salvation? Surely no men enjoyed greater privileges, under more matchless tuition than did they from him who came "not to be ministered unto but to minister". The peculiarity must first be attributed, no doubt, to the fact that Paul preached more widely to Gentiles. He founded those churches to which he wrote. He had a living interest in them. But why did not Peter do the same? To him Christ gave the command "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel". We know that he did preach to the Gentiles but we are led to be-

believe that it was the exception rather than the rule, especially during his early ministry.

But with Paul it was different. From the day that the light shone about him on his way to Damascus, to the day he wrote those parting words in the Mamartine dungeon, his life was directed toward the saving of the Gentiles. He was told that he must stand before princes and kings and he accepted the commission. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. Not because he was less of a Jew than Peter, he was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews". He was taught by Gamaliel at Jerusalem, the greatest teacher of his time, in the very centre of Judaism [and Judaistic influences.

With this question before us, let us seek for an answer.

Paul was chosen of God to do a distinctive work for him among the Gentiles. When we consider his preparation we find a very potent factor, at least, in his early life and surroundings. Looking at it from a little different angle we may ask, What was it that sent Paul to the Gentiles? How came it that in his mind were formulated the principles of Gentile salvation? For answer we will discuss his early home.

Tarsus was the home of Paul's boyhood and it had much to do in shaping his after life. Some one has said, "Let me teach the child and I care not who trains the ^{youth} ~~child~~ and ^{the} man". There is a truth here which is not far to seek. The character is moulded from the early beginnings. Paul's early teacher was Tarsus, and her lesson was well taught. It is not certain how

Young Paul lived in Tarsus. He went to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel at an early age, perhaps at thirteen but even then his life was somewhat shaped. Jewish children of that time matured earlier than do children of our time.

Tarsus was a city of considerable importance for several reasons, chief of which was its position upon the trunk line of travel and trade between the East and the West. Here the caravans from the far East halted and displayed their wares. Here the ships of the Mediterranean impored and discharged their cargoes. And here passed the Roman soldier, going to the provinces beyond. For some act Tarsus had been made a free city, and thereupon, to build up her dignity, she began to draw to herself the peculiarities of the cities of other lands. This resulted in making her cosmopolitan. This was true not only of her population and her learning but also of her religion. People came for purposes of trade and brought their gods with them. Men of learning came and set up their centres of influence. Religionists came and set up their shrines for worship, their altars and their idols.

This all had an influence upon Paul that was seen in later years. The spirit of a "free man" and a Roman citizen, appeared in his step and gave him the spirit to demand an honorable release when the magistrates would let him go secretly. The learning of the place, we may conclude, inspired him to "sit at the feet" of the most learned Jew, Gamaliel, and there get the

wisdom which served him in such good stead in presenting his doctrines before all classes, of so many lands, and enabled him to formulate his letters which have ever since been the chief source of doctrine of the Christian Church. But bearing more closely upon our inquiry is the influence which the religion of Tarsus had upon his youthful mind. Iverach says that the "religions of Tarsus were many in number and mixed in character. Paul saw before his eyes in his' boyhood a living picture of the intellectual, moral and social effects which spring from heathenism." He saw the idols in the temples, the trains of worshippers at the feasts, as for instance at the Baccanalia, the drinking and other impure rites connected with the worship of gods of Egypt and Babylon, of Greece and Rome. By an active lad like Paul these must have been noted and they must have caused thought.

But greater still was this influence when taken in contrast with his rigorous home training. He was taught to abhor idols in his early days. And again after the life in Jerusalem had begun, how the contrast must have been heightened, especially if he made any visits to his home during his student life.

Then, too, the sight of the traders and their wares, their foreign dress and manners may have given rise to a desire to see the lands whence they came. At first this desire would have been apart from any object of Christianizing. But he may have thought of turning them to Judaism. His studies were being pursued with a view to greatest usefulness in some such a line,

when suddenly the light from heaven shined round about him brighter than the noon-day sun, and he heard a voice. That voice was the torch that kindled the ready fuel. That voice opened before him the door to the carrying out of his plans, but in how different a way from what he had thought! At the sound of that voice the scales fell from his eyes and he saw things in a different light.

From this point we might go on with a complete life of St. Paul; for the rest of his life was spent in work for the heathen. His preaching to the Jews was an attendant circumstance. Not that Paul did not feel for them, he did and that very keenly as he shows in Rom. ix. 1-5. But his life was primarily for the Gentiles. Instead of giving such a life, however, we shall select only those instances which show most clearly what was the nature of ^{the} heathenism which he had to fight and what was his method of attack.

His general method of approach. I have said that he loved his people and the fact that he preached to the Jews first in every place where they had a synagogue might be taken as additional proof of that, but there were reasons for such a course outside of that love. The Jews made an integral part of almost every community of the Empire, hated, perhaps, and yet with certain affinities and influences, in the way of trade and also of religion. — For they were a proselyting people.

Paul was not preaching a new religion. It was only the fruit of the plant of which Judaism was the stalk. It had

direct connection, so he felt and so in fact it was, with the prophets that had gone before. And so he preached to his people that they might carry it to their neighbors. He had a common ground, he could take something for granted with them; in a sense the way was prepared, even though he found here one of his greatest hinderances also. He could get into the synagogue but he couldn't stay there. The Jews themselves thrust him out but, strangely enough, he seemed to go through and out the other door and to take some with him. I mean that, though he had to leave the synagogue, it served as a stepping-stone to a Gentile church. He didn't have to retreat. This wisdom came from his long training. But so much for his method of attack, his modus operandi.

As we have already said, our plan is to study certain instances in Paul's career and not his whole life in detail. We intend, moreover, here to enumerate them more or less fully and then draw our conclusions as to the state of Heathenism and his headway against it. Yet in some sense the two divisions must overlap.

The first incident which we shall mention is his meeting with Elymas the sorcerer, and the conversion of Sergius Paulus. Here Paul meets the religion of the East, or rather a perverted form of it. No doubt he had seen the same thing in Tarsus. Here too Paul makes his first convert of note. He was to stand "before princes and kings" and until now it had been the poor country people to whom he had preached.

Leaving Crete he goes to the main land of Asia and that journey ensues wherein he plants the Galatian churches, Antioch and Iconium and Lystra and Derbe. Let us meet him at Lystra. The Jews have driven him out at the other places. Now, however, he is across the border. Not so many Jews, almost none, a strange language, a simple people, and a warmer, less modified faith in the heathen divinities, present themselves. Paul and Barnabas are received and the crowd gathers to hear their message, given, through an interpreter perhaps. It is probable that the people were moved. They begin to look for something above the natural and they have not long to wait. The lame man is healed. This was all that was needed to confirm the already aroused suspicion. "The gods have come down to us" they cry in their own tongue and hasten away to prepare the fitting reception. The account is so well known that it is not necessary to draw it out. We see the hurried preparation of the sacrifice brought to the gate of the city, the garlands, the music, the crowd of worshippers, then the horror of the apostles at learning of their intent. They run among the people, crying out to them and rending their garments, an act expressive, to the Jew of the greatest repugnance and aversion. To a Jew who worshipped the one God, what could be more sacrilegious than to allow himself to be worshipped? They succeeded in restraining the people and then at the instigation of the enemies, who had arrived by this time, the opposite extreme was reached. Paul was stoned. The pendulum swings its whole arc. Here the author of the Acts shows his freedom

from any tendency to the marvelous, for he does not say that a miracle was wrought on Paul but simply that while the brethren stood around he rose up and went into the city. He had been dragged out for dead.

If we liken Paul's life to a campaign against the heathenism of the time this was an engagement that apparently ended disastrously to Paul. But we soon learn that Paul wins where he seems to fail, even though the failure seem so complete as this did. A company is left behind within the garrison of the enemy that carries on his struggle. The remainder of this journey is of interest to us only in a general way and we next take note of Paul at Troas on his way to Europe. He sees the man of Macedonia and forthwith he and his companions take ship. The journey is short and Paul soon reaches Philippi. The word is preached, the Jews angered, the maid healed and the populace stirred to violence. And here let us mention what we shall speak of again, that the reason so often assigned for this act seems to me to be not well grounded. Greed may have moved the men who were the prime movers but there was something back of that which gave them power with the people and that was "religiousness". So it was later at Ephesus. But to return, lest we anticipate too much. The apparent defeat and imprisonment results here in the conversion of the jailor and his family, and the establishment of a church at Philippi. There too the Roman officers were made a little uncomfortable when they learned that they had allowed such treatment to Roman citizens, uncondemned,

and were glad to bring them (Paul and Silas) out of the prison and send them away. They are soon off and we hasten after them through Thessalonica and Berea, stopping only for a little at each place.

At Athens we find Paul at last alone. He was so solicitous for his children in Christ that he was willing to be left alone that he might send back words of cheer to Macedonia. At Athens the events are a little different. There was no Jewish synagogue there to turn him out and consequently no chance to use this means of approach. There Paul encounters the philosophy of the Empire. He had met superstition but now he met learning, learning that was proud of its own achievements. To the Greeks, Paul could say, the cross was foolishness. Here Paul saw the many altars, here he found people who did nothing but to hear and tell some new thing. This gave Paul an incentive and a chance to speak and he improved it. Like one who years before taught in those porches, Paul gathered a company about him that he might present the higher life, this time in the life of Christ. And since his doctrine was something new they became interested and so brought him before the court of the Areopagus. Before this body he delivered the speech which we have in the Acts. The Jewish synagogue was lacking, with the knowledge of the Jewish law, but, scholar as he was, Paul was not at a loss to find some means of approach. He had seen their altars and on one the inscription "to an unknown god". This, Paul said, was the God he preached, not ignorantly, but from per-

sonal experience. More than this, he presented a quotation from ^{one} their own poets "we are his offspring" and from that argued to them the foolishness of worshipping wood and stone in the likeness of things of earth. But the Grecian mind was slow to take hold of this new teaching and Paul went away to Corinth with no apparent success save a few who were baptized.

At Corinth Paul's surroundings were such that here perhaps he saw the worst picture of the immorality of Heathenism of his experience. Here he sat and penned those lines which express the bodily and spiritual dishonor caused by idolatry. (Pomi. 24-32) Here he labored for some time to turn the current. The church which he founded needed some sharp language later but it was a strong church nevertheless. Here the Jews failed to stir up the persecution which they had raised against him at other places. But their plots were a constant trial and menace to Paul.

Let us hasten across the sparkling waters of the blue Aegean and meet Paul once more in another of the cities of importance in Asia. No doubt in his boyhood he had heard the name of Ephesus and perhaps he had heard of the worship of Diana, or even seen her shrines. We know at least that Paul had tried to reach this point before but was hindered. (Now he came to it from the other side. Had he reached it from the East in the early days of his ministry he would have been practically alone, but now he had helpers from the east and west alike. Priscilla and Aquila went with him and remained to sow

the seed while he, after a short stay, went on his way to Jerusalem. By their instruction Apollos was established in the true faith and started on his career of usefulness for Christ. So we may take it for granted that when Paul returned a goodly church of Christians awaited him. For three months he reasoned in the synagogue and then, driven out, he preached for two years in "the school of one Tyrannus" "so that all they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of God, both Jews and Greeks"

The attempted copying of his miracles by the exorcists, and their failure and discomforture resulted in the bonfire of books on magic arts, to the value of fifty thousand pieces of silver. Such was the condition of magic in the Empire at this time. But the chief event of interest in Ephesus is the uproar caused by Demetrius and his fellow-craftsmen. Though Paul was not caught, the movement was directed primarily against him as the chief agent in spreading the Gospel of Christ. But they connected him with all Jews as was shown by the uproar which arose when Alexander was put forward to speak to them. Paul saw that he could serve the church there and elsewhere best by going away. And though the uproar had ceased, since he felt that it might be raised again at any moment, he departed.

From this point the narrative in the Acts is taken up principally with the intrigues and plots against Paul by the Jews. Paul had planned to go to Rome, to the capital of Hea-thenism but instead he found himself in the prison at Caesarea. But Paul was to see Rome. When he planned the voyage he little

thought that his enemies who were trying to hinder his ministry would furnish conveyance for him. But so it was. As a prisoner he started for Rome. But God gave him his companions in travel on the way and prepared a house in which he could preach Christ, perhaps to better advantage than if he had gone as a free man. We need to bear in mind the incident of the shipwreck, when the viper fastened upon the hand of the apostle and was shaken off into the fire. The simple natives gave it the interpretation which their training, or, perhaps, their lack of training, suggested. The two years or more that Paul was in Rome were fruitful years, fruitful in the peaceful conquest of hearts for the Master. The question of his death, whether it occurred at the end of the two years or after a liberation and a second imprisonment does not belong to this paper and therefore must be postponed to some future time. It is sufficient to say here that there is a tradition that Paul carried the Gospel into Spain and that he evangelized Crete. At any rate he kept his hand upon the helm of the churches. Where he had preached he still continued to guide and instruct.

We turn now to the consideration of the condition of Heathenism in the Empire as shown by these incidents and by Paul's letters. Let us remember that it is now near the middle of the first century. Rome is at her zenith of power. She has conquered nearly all of the civilized world. Her treatment of the gods of conquered peoples is well known.

Referring then to our sources, we notice, first, that the religion was composite. While being primarily Greek^{contained}-Roman, it^{contained} elements from Egypt, the East and from the Semitic religions of Asia Minor. The East is represented by the sorcerer and the magic rites; Egypt by the worship of "birds and beasts and creeping things" (Rom. i. 23.) Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury) are worshipped in the Galatian City, Diana at Ephesus, and Apollo is represented by the fortune-teller of Philippi. A good picture of this condition is seen at Athens where Paul saw so many altars and images and at last one to "an unknown God".

Again, it was idolatrous. At Athens Paul found the City "full of idols". At Ephesus was the "image that fell down from Jupiter", "Diana of the Ephesians". In Paul's letters almost no thought is more prominent than that of idols. He speaks of "meat offered to idols," of the "likeness of an image of corruptible man and of birds and of four-footed beasts and creeping things". (Rom. i. 23) In many other places idols and idol worship are spoken of and condemned. In connection with this we may call attention to the temples and ritual of the worship. At Lystra was a temple to Zeus and priests performed regular sacrifices, for an extra sacrifice was made when Paul and Barnabas were thought to be gods.

Again, it was superstitious. Superstition is a characteristic of ignorance and so we would expect to find it playing an important part in the religious life of the peoples of that time. Such is the case at the scene of the ship-wreck. They think

that Paul is a malefactor who cannot escape the punishment of the gods, but when he does not fall down dead their censure changes to praise and they are ready to call him a god. So also at Lystra, the miracle called forth worship from the simple people. To them it was not an unheard of thing for the gods to appear as men.

It is this characteristic that gives us the best explanation of the uproars at Philippi and Ephesus. Iverach and others tell us that they were caused by greed. In a sense this is true. It was greed that aroused the owners of the slave-girl and the silver-shrine makers. They were not religious. Familiarity with the objects upon which they wrought had caused them to lose faith in their religious vir~~ty~~ue. But they did not tell the people that they were losing money. With the people religion, or superstition, was the motive upon which they worked. The slave-girl was possessed by a python, a spirit from Apollo and this act of Paul's was a direct stroke at their god. So at Ephesus, Diana was the patron of the City. Theirs it was to keep ~~the~~ her image which Jupiter had consigned to their care. When the silver-smiths cried "Great is Diana of the Ephesians" the people were ready to take up the cry and to become a unit against anything that menaced their goddess. Demetrius in his speech to his fellow craftsmen urged their business as one reason but coupled with it the danger to their "goddess whom all Asia and the world worshipping."

Again, the religion of the empire was losing favor with the

upper classes. At Athens we hear of the Epicurean and Stoic schools of philosophy that sought in their own way to fit up a religion that would suit them. Roman influence was being felt. This is evident from the condition of things that Paul found at Lystra. There he was outside the pale of Roman influence. There was seen the more primitive worship. Paul speaks of the worship of men, another feature of the influence of Rome, who now began to place her Emperors in the Pantheon.

Lastly, this religion, or aggregate of religions, was very licentious. In fact we know that at various places licentiousness was a part of the religion. Paul recognizes however in the case of the incestuous member of the church at Corinth, a depth of sin lower than that of the Heathen. Corinth has the name of being the most licentious city of the times, and there Paul penned that picture of vice and corruption which has been the horror of all readers to the present time. (Rom. i. 24-32) But we have no need to think that he overdrew the picture. He saw the sin going on around him as he wrote and toiled. Other references to the same thing are so frequent as to leave no doubt that the votaries of lust were no niggardly followers. On the whole the tone of the narrative in the Acts is so impartial as to leave no thought of exaggeration and many times the references are quite circumstantial and therefore the more trustworthy.

As to the result of the struggle it is not necessary to add much. In the few years of his ministry, Paul had plant-

ed churches in the points of importance throughout the Empire and bound them together with a bond that made them such a power as should in two and a half centuries evangelize the whole Empire. He organized a revolution that did not revolt, but in time it was the government. He was wise in making them subject to the laws of the empire for that preserved order till the new community was strong enough to assume control. We find no more fitting expression to put at the close of Paul's work than that which his own hand placed there, penned from the depths of the Mamertine prison: "I am ready to be offered and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day: and not only to me but also to all ~~to~~ all them that have loved his appearing." (ii. Tim. iv. 6-8.)

 Charles Frederick Smith.
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