

Installment 6

Who is Paul of Tarsus?

Every now and then you run across a book so personally powerful that it stays in your book case from that time on, assuming, that is, you don't loan it out and forget who has it! Eric Hoffer's little volume The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements was that kind of book for me. And if you have it, will you please return it?

Apparently many others feel the same way because True Believer, published first in 1951, is still available new in its 23rd edition. Hoffer discusses in part the psychological roots of fanaticism, which for him helps explain the explosive growth of movements like early Christianity and Islam. True Believer is not a religious book though its ideas help interpret religious as well as political and economic movements.

Hoffer's insights attempt to clarify what goes on in the mind of a person who could join a group dedicated to 911¹, with its goal the attempted mass destruction of property and people, crying out all the time "Allah Akbar!" ("God is the greatest!"). To one who remembers the fall of the Third Reich, I hear whispers of "Heil Hitler!" in the background. To Hoffer, both movements, one religious and the other secular, use the same type of chant to mutual advantage. In fact, the two movements may despise the philosophy of one another even though they use the same type of self-hypnotizing mantras. And, believe it or not, Hoffer's book lends insight on Paul of Tarsus' attraction to Jesus of Nazareth from a secular standpoint. It helps me answer the question: Who is Paul of Tarsus?

Paul the Man

As regards Paul, the New Testament paints with a broad brush. We are not told very much; in fact, almost nothing about his childhood. This shows us that the writers of Scripture were primarily interested in the saving life and death of Jesus, and even about Him there is precious little about his early years. However, we have been picking small bits here and there that help us. Paul (meaning "small," "little") was born into a family that was almost certainly Hellenistic Jewish in culture, of the tribe of Benjamin. His first name was Saul (meaning "prayed for"). Somewhere along the line he was tutored by

¹ September 11, 2001, date of the terrorist attack on New York's "Twin Towers."

Gamaliel, a rather famous rabbi. Paul was a Pharisee and, by his own estimation, a rather good one. He saw value in the tradition of “the fathers.” We know nothing about his immediate family. The scholars are still scratching their heads about whether or not he was married. I assume Paul’s enthusiasm for Judaism was applauded by his parents, especially his father. On the other hand, his conservatism may have gone against his father’s notion of child-rearing. What we need is just a bit more insight into the structure of his family to grasp the shape of Paul’s psyche.

Certainly Paul had many good characteristics that he brought into his later Christian life. While he did participate in Stephen’s death, and who knows how many more, he was no psychopath. As I mentioned above, Paul was a dutiful Pharisee, as I think his father was too, and he valued the instruction of “*the fathers*,” those men who helped shape the teaching of Paul’s branch of the Pharisees. After reading about Paul, I am confident he was respected by the Jews in Antioch, at least as much as he was feared by the Christians². Paul certainly had a good mind and studied the classics of his day, as we see in Acts 17:28.

There is no question though that Paul despised Christians. Undoubtedly he saw them as apostates from the true faith, probably more so than Sadducees. So it would take something special to convert a man like Paul, and the Lord God provided that—a face to face meeting with Jesus on the Road to Damascus. It most certainly caused a re-evaluation of Paul’s view of himself.

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom
I am the worst.³*

It is difficult for me to grasp the depth of Paul’s experience with the living Christ, but it was enough. The Christ he questioned he later adored. The hatred he had for Christians was later translated into self-giving love for them. The Romans, whom he found insufferable, he later saw as fit members of the kingdom of God, that is, through the Christ they strung up on a hill. **Rejoice, you Gentiles with God’s people!**

² See Acts 26:10-11 for some more details about Saul’s hatred of Christians.

³ 1 Timothy 1:15, NIV. What did Paul mean by “the worst?” ¹²“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.” 1 Timothy 1:12-13, NIV.

While there are several short vignettes in the New Testament that speak to the character of Paul the Christian evangelist, we only have time for one: **Romans 15: 7-16**. This section of Romans comes at the end of the letter, a detailed, personal letter urging Christians who lived in Rome to accept one another regardless of whether they were born Jewish or Gentile. After all, it made no difference to Christ whether one was circumcised or not, or whether one hailed from Macedonia or Jerusalem, whether one was Roman or Barbarian. All people are one in Christ Jesus! That's what Paul the Christian said!⁴

As you approach the reading below, think of groups that might be enemies of yours were it not for the grace of Jesus Christ. Since I am from the South I might think of tensions between blacks and whites. Overseas missionaries might think of people from India and people from Pakistan. Do you remember the two groups who most surely ought to be one in Christ? Christians and their enemies!

Later a mature Paul wrote:

⁷Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs ⁹so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written⁵:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;

I will sing hymns to your name."¹⁰Again, it says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."¹¹And again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,

and sing praises to him, all you peoples."¹²And again, Isaiah says,

"The Root of Jesse will spring up,

one who will arise to rule over the nations;

the Gentiles will hope in him."

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves [Gentiles] are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. ¹⁵I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of pro-

⁴ Galatians 3:28-29, NIV, "²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

⁵ Paul quotes Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10 as examples of The Old Testament's call to Gentiles to honor and praise God. Thus, God's final redemptive word is to Jews and Gentiles alike.

claiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.



Let's take a look at some of the details we find in **Romans 15: 7-16**.

Verse 7: The words translated “*accept*” and “*accepted*” in this verse might better be translated “*welcome*” and “*welcomed*.” Does that change the meaning of the sentence for you? Some think Paul is writing the book of Romans to Gentiles. If so, how does that change the meaning of the sentence...or does it?

Verses 8-9: Paul affirms that Christ came first to the Jews and ministered to them, after which He turned to the Gentiles.⁶ In the Book of Acts a recurring theme is that Peter ministered primarily to Jews and Paul ministered primarily to Gentiles. The Contemporary English Version translates verse 8 as follows: “*I tell you that Christ came as a servant of the Jews to show that God has kept the promises he made to their famous ancestors.*”

Verse 13: May God “*fill*” those who trust Him with “*joy*,” “*peace*” and the “*power of the Holy Spirit*” so believers will “*overflow*” with “*hope*.” God gives us His own power to enable us to triumph in joy and peace. No human “*work*” can accomplish such spiritual grace. In order to see what Paul thought about the grace of Christ, let's read his view of people outside of Christ. To Timothy, Paul wrote:

“⁸We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. ⁹We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”⁷

Verses 14-16: These verses contain words that relate to priestly functions: “*the priestly duty*,” “*an offering*,” and “*sanctified*.” (Cf. Romans 12:1, for a similar reading). Think

⁶ Note the Lord's teaching in Matthew 10:5-8.

⁷ 1 Timothy 1:8-11.

of these words being written of people who were once regarded as pagans by the Jews. Think of what God does on behalf of anyone who turns to Him. God's grace is a miracle of love! What additional act of grace is implied in the verses for this lesson? How about this: *God gives saving grace to our enemies and makes our enemies our friends?*

Something Else to Think About

In Christianity the idea of “nationalistic particularism” is the iron-clad belief that one's denomination or people or creed, is the last word on what is right, good, and best. Thus, while nationalistic particularism is more fitted to politics, it can be used in a religious sense as well. So one might think that while other groups exist, they are not as right and/or good as ours. This is a fundamental teaching of True Believer.

In Texas , some fifty years ago, there was a running feud between Baptists and Methodists. One night I attended a Baptist revival and in his message the evangelist said that all Methodists were going to hell. Its true! That very next Sunday I heard a Methodist pastor say in his sermon that Baptist beliefs were from the devil. That's true, both in less than a week! Now, here are Christians excommunicating one another in the worst way. Each speaker thought his church was doctrinally correct and he had no trouble condemning the other one. In one week I heard a splendid example of “nationalistic particularism” used by Christians.

Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian ethicist and teacher, says St. Paul purged early Christianity of ideas that foster such religious nationalistic particularism by

1. saying that the Gospel is equally for Gentiles as for Jews, and
2. rejecting the requirements of Jewish law (Mosaic Law) for Christians and saying that pleases God, and
3. substituting the “church” for “nation” as “the Israel of God.”⁸

Would you agree with Niebuhr? Niebuhr shows us how difficult it was for Jesus to preach and teach an inclusive Gospel. It still is! Many people think the Gospel is a white man's Gospel, which is not true. The Gospel appeals to every person and is an invitation to every person, regardless of ethnic background, language, whatever! St. Paul is the poster man for an inclusive Gospel, good news for Jews and Gentiles! In Jesus the

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, p. 42.

wall that separates us from one another has been broken down!

So, who is Paul of Tarsus? What do you think?

Preparing for our next lesson: The Third Heaven.

1. Read Romans 1:1-17 on the subject of an inclusive Gospel. What do you find?
2. Read Acts 10:1-48. How does Cornelius help us apply the Gospel to people who are different from us?
3. From what we have learned about Saul/Paul so far, what would Saul/Paul have to learn about the Gospel before becoming one of its greatest proclaimers?

----Jerry Mercer

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