

Acts 26:1-32, No. 51
“Paul’s Reformation”
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Last week we considered the circumstances that provided an opportunity for Paul to make still one more defense of his life and conduct, this time before the governor, Festus, and one of Rome’s client kings, Herod Agrippa II, and his sister, Bernice. Now we hear the defense itself.

Text Comment

- v.3 Once again the *captatio benevolentiae*, the opening statement meant to put the judge in a favorable state of mind toward the defendant.
- v.5 Once again the intelligence that, though Paul hailed from Tarsus, he grew up in Jerusalem, a fact he mentioned earlier in 22:3, and, further, that he had been a member of the party of the Pharisees. Indeed, as he mentioned in 23:6, his father had been a Pharisee before him.
- v.8 Once again, Paul says both that the Christian faith is not only continuous with Judaism but is the true fulfillment of its spiritual destiny. The proof of that is, of course, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the event that clarified for all time the true meaning of the law and the prophets.
- v.10 “Cast my vote against them” probably indicates that Paul was himself a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. The plural “them” here suggests that Stephen was not the only early martyr.
- v.11 Again, we are here told that Paul made a project of the persecution of Christians. The synagogue could punish, especially with the lash. Paul would himself suffer that fate on several occasions as we know. “Tried to make them blaspheme” means that he tried to make them denounce Christ and renounce their faith in him. This is precisely what Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, would later tell the emperor Trajan he had sought to do.
- “Those who denied that they were, or ever had been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered invocation, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ – none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing – these I thought it proper to discharge.” [*Epistles* 10:96]
- v.14 This is the only place where this part of the conversation between Christ and Paul is mentioned. “Kicking against the goads” was a proverbial saying drawn from agricultural life that suggested the stabbing of the conscience, a struggle within oneself over whether what one was doing was right. Apparently Paul was already in some way, at some level, uneasy about what he was doing in persecuting Christians. Was it his witnessing of

Stephen's death and his spirit of forgiveness toward those who were murdering him that began to chip away at Paul's confidence? Was Paul trying to quiet his conscience by going after the Christians with even more determination? Notice his language in v. 11: "raging fury against them." He was obsessed; something that can happen when people are trying to silence their conscience.

- v.18 This is the third recital of the conversion of Paul found in the book of Acts, remarkable given Luke's economy of words and what is obviously the necessity under which he wrote to leave out so much that he might have included. In fact, the conversion of Paul – of which there is another account in Romans 7 – is given more space in the NT than any other event except the passion of the Lord. More space is devoted to it than even to the narrative of the resurrection! Why? Because in the NT this is the example *par excellence* of the conversion of a sinner, a larger than life example that makes it easy to see what conversion is: the intervention of God, the change of a person's nature, the behavioral changes that flow inevitably from it, and so on.
- v.20 His message, that is, was justification and sanctification.
- v.23 That is, the prophets predicted Christ's death and resurrection *as the way of the world's salvation*. It was a feature of the popular dispensationalism of an earlier day that the OT was unaware of the so-called "church age" or the gospel mission to the Gentiles. That was not Paul's view!
- v.24 No one could doubt Paul's learning. The man oozed learning and intellectual sophistication. But a Roman, unacquainted with the Scriptures, was unlikely to take any of this seriously.
- v.26 Paul was more interested in Agrippa's opinion. He knew a lot more than Festus did both about the Hebrew Scriptures and about all that had happened in the region over the past thirty years.
- v.28 Agrippa didn't want to answer Paul's question. There would be trouble for him either way. If he answered "Yes," then he could expect Paul to press him: why then don't you follow Jesus? If he answered, "No," he would be inviting Paul's instruction.

It is Reformation Sunday and, ordinarily, I would have preached a sermon *apropos* the remembrance of that extraordinarily important event in Christian history: the recovery of the gospel in the 16th century, the implications of which still reverberate around the world. But, as it happened, I couldn't have chosen a better text for a Reformation Sunday sermon than the one that comes next in this series of sermons on Acts.

We don't ordinarily think of the first century as a reformation of the church, but in many respects that was precisely what it was and with similar effects as the Reformation in the 16th century. Judaism, after all, was the church of God. Israel is called the church several times in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 7:38) and the church is called Israel in the New Testament. The church is the people of God and the Jews were, therefore, the church.

And what was the condition of the church at the time of the birth of Christ? Well, it was in much the same condition as the church in Europe when Martin Luther was born. It had the appearance of the people of God, it had its sanctuaries and its services, its priesthood and its rituals, but the life had gone out of it. It had lost touch with the gospel as a living power in the hearts and lives of people. People related to God at a distance, if at all. The ministry was corrupt, jealous of its privileges, largely uncaring of the spiritual life of the people. The people were then, as in Luther's day, "sheep without a shepherd." The great message of divine grace and love, of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, of the need for atonement had been blunted to the point of insignificance. The leadership of the church was self-confident more than humble, sin had been reduced to a manageable problem rather than the fatal index of the human condition, and God himself was thought dispassionately to calculate the efforts of human beings to please him not, with amazing love, to intervene to do for them what they could not do for themselves. *The proof of this is that when the Son of God came among them, his life and teaching were so much the contradiction of theirs, they were so deeply offended by what he said and did that they put him to death!*

Brought up on this view of their religion the people themselves lived their lives more interested in other things than giving glory to God or loving him with their lives. How was this not the situation that Luther faced in 1517?

To be sure, there were exceptions. There remained in the church in both historical periods – the first century and the 16th – faithful followers of the Lord, people who loved the Lord, trusted him for their salvation, and sought to serve him with their lives. The Lord's first disciples and Luther's earliest supporters came largely from these groups. Think of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John in the one case and the Brethren of the Common Life, the Hussites, and the Lollards in the other. But in both cases such people were a small minority and didn't exercise enough influence to change the church's course, until, that is, God intervened!

Now Jesus did what Martin Luther did not and could not. He died for the sins of the world and rose to give new and everlasting life to those who believe in him. Luther was no Jesus! *In that sense Jesus was much more than a reformer!* But as a preacher and a leader, Jesus was a Reformer of the church and Paul was one of the circle of Reformers that gathered around him. Jesus restored her true faith, under his scintillating teaching the people recovered a true understanding of the Word of God, thrilled to its message of divine love and salvation by grace, and began once again to live as servants of the living God. And, as in the 16th century, the same results occurred. A large part of the church welcomed the Reformation and began to practice the true faith in a new and living way. The gospel began to spread outwards to multitudes more. Thousands upon thousands of Jews embraced this faith and began to live accordingly, forming the foundation of a new epoch in the life of God's people.

But, at the same time, a large portion of the church repudiated the Reformation Jesus had begun, as it would repudiate the Reformation that Martin Luther began. The attitude of the establishment would harden; in fear of losing their place the leaders of the church would begin to persecute those who had embraced the Reformation and would double-down on their false

views of the Scriptures and the faith and life revealed in them. Tradition and the status quo trumped the Word of God! Judaism became in those days and the days that followed more fully and consistently a religion of works and of ethnic tradition than it had been before, so determined was it to distance itself from the reforming movement associated with Jesus of Nazareth. Now think of Paul in these terms, the very terms he himself used to describe himself here in Acts 26.

He was not only a member of the church, he was at least a version of a cleric, one of the leaders of the church. He was, of course, an extraordinarily able man, a man possessed of immense intellectual gifts. He rose to a prominent position as a result. He was so much a member of the establishment, an insider in the church of his day, that the church turned to him to help turn the tide in its battle with the reforming movement of Jesus. He was, by upbringing and training, thoroughly indoctrinated in the thinking of the Judaism of his day. Nothing whatsoever suggested that he would join the Jesus movement. Indeed, quite the contrary. He was rabid in his hatred of the *Lutherans* of his day. He was John Tetzl and John Eck rolled into one! We don't know the extent to which he interacted theologically with the teaching of the Christians, with their claims, but it is clear enough that he had no sympathy with them. His was the theology of the rabbis, the works-theology of a system of salvation based on human merit earned by good works. In too many ways, his view of the faith was, in principle, very like that of the church's priests in Luther's day, though Paul was probably more zealous than most of them. His world was threatened by Jesus' reformation and he was determined to save it.

And, then, God intervened; Jesus intervened; the Holy Spirit intervened. How soon the disquiet began to appear in Paul's soul we cannot say. Whole books have been written trying to chart the course of Luther's personal pilgrimage: when the crisis of conscience first made its appearance, precisely when it was overcome in the experience of God's grace and Christ's presence. Nevertheless, Paul, like Luther, found himself at war with himself in some way. He found himself kicking against the goads. Something was not right. There was something about the Christians that he couldn't get unstuck from his craw, something that worried him, that bothered him, that made him unsure of himself. And then, in a moment, unexpectedly, dramatically his worldview, his theology, his understanding of God, of himself, and of salvation lay in ruins around his feet.

Jesus Christ had appeared to him, the living Lord, and demanded to know why Paul was persecuting *him*. Paul had been *persecuting the Son of God*. That fact was obvious in the very moment: he saw Jesus in his glory. He was in that moment speaking to, he was encountering *God himself!* No one remains unchanged by such an encounter; no one can. Paul certainly couldn't. Suddenly, in that moment on the road to Damascus, though there were others around him Paul found himself alone before God, before the Jesus Christ the Christian's worshipped. In that moment he and Christ were the two and only two luminously obvious persons in the world! In that moment Paul found himself on the wrong side of God and of history. Paul was a religious man, a devout man, a man of the Scriptures. He was observant. He practiced his faith. What he realized now was that it had been *the wrong faith*. Even in the church of God, even among the people of God he had been, they had been practicing the wrong faith! That is precisely what Luther would discover 1500 years later! He had badly misunderstood the Bible. His teachers had misled him. Though he was trained to be a biblical scholar he had missed the Bible's main point!

In the same way, Paul knew a great deal about the Bible. He didn't start studying the Word of God *after* he became a Christian. He had studied it from his boyhood, no doubt had memorized large portions of it, and had examined it in greater detail at the feet of Gamaliel. But like a great many biblical scholars who would come after him, his mind and heart were closed to its great message. He was like the minister friend of John Newton, the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." This man believed the Bible was the Word of God. He was an Anglican parish minister for goodness sake. He was a moral man and taught his people to be moral people. And he did so for years. But one day he was reading his Bible, in the Greek New Testament no less, in particular Ephesians chapter 3. There he came across Paul's remark about the "unsearchable riches of Christ." He'd read it before, of course, but this time he was struck because it suddenly occurred to him that while Paul spoke of heights and depths and unsearchable riches when he spoke of Christ and salvation, he thought and had always thought that the message of the Bible was plain and simple and rational. Paul apparently found mysteries and glories where he found none. That realization led him to reinvestigate the Bible and its message and that study revolutionized his life and his ministry. He discovered the gospel, which he had known nothing about before, even though he was a faithful reader of the Bible. [Newton, *Works*, I, 597]

Paul knew the Bible, but he was blind, deaf, and dumb so far as its great message was concerned. He knew many things about God, about the history of God's people, and about the law of God. *But what he didn't know was more important!* What Paul didn't know was that the salvation of a sinner, any sinner, required the direct, personal intervention of God. What he didn't know was the full measure of the spiritual and moral impotence of man in himself and left to himself. What he didn't know was that the atonement necessary to deliver man from his guilt and from the power of sin, could be offered by no one less than God himself, now become a man. What he didn't know was that the grace of God needed personally, meaningfully, lovingly, and trustingly to be embraced by faith and love in order for a sinner to obtain God's salvation.

No wonder then that the impotence of man apart from God, the sovereign grace of God, the centrality of the cross of Christ, and the necessity of personal faith in him became the great emphases of his ministry. As Augustine would say later, "What I live by, I impart." And that was true of Paul. His message became the proclamation and the explanation of what he had learned in his own personal encounter with Christ, the very things he made prominent in his defense before Festus and Agrippa: as we read in vv. 18, 20, and 23!

It is an interesting and important fact that Paul never patronized his audience. He wrote the same things to uneducated slaves as he wrote to men of stature and position; the same thing to women as to men, to children as to adults; to Jews as to Greeks. He wrote to them all deep, hard, searching truth. Why? Because he knew very well that anyone could understand this truth if only God would open his or her mind or heart. He knew very well that he had utterly missed the truth though he was very intelligent and had been reading the Bible every day. The problem wasn't intellectual, it was spiritual. He didn't need a better education, he needed a new heart. Salvation didn't require of him more effort or different effort, it required the recognition that he was incapable of saving himself, that God must do it, that only in Christ could it be done, and only by faith in Christ could it be obtained. He knew very well that anyone could understand this message if only they had eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to embrace it.

And *that* was Luther's experience as well. He knew the Bible. He could read it in its original languages. He was a professional student of the Word of God. He was a *teacher* of the Word of God. But spiritual blindness, the noetic or intellectual effect of his bondage to sin and self, prevented him from understanding its main, its obvious, its emphatic, its repeated message: that salvation is by grace through faith, that Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for us, is the only Savior of sinners, and that the Savior is also the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and so those who trust him for forgiveness must serve him and obey him in their ordinary, daily lives.

You may have read that Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes, was based on a doctor trained at the famous medical school in London, St. Bartholomew's. You may remember that the great preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, was likewise a St. Bartholomew trained man. Barts training became famous for its rigorous approach to diagnosis and treatment. Doctors in training were taught to ask questions of the patient and of themselves, one after another, in order to be able to answer the most important question: viz. "what is wrong with this person?" They were taught never to content themselves with the obvious answer or the easy answer until they were sure that they had eliminated all other possibilities and had diagnosed the person's true condition. Only then could the right treatment be prescribed.

Well, Paul was a Barts man before his time! He was an expert at diagnosis in part because he had bungled diagnosis so badly at one time in his life. Now he had learned what was wrong with people and, knowing what was wrong, he knew what was necessary to cure the disease. He was a far greater sinner than the Jewish establishment ever understood. Atonement was a far greater thing than the rabbis imagined. Once that was understood, the rest fell into place. As Paul would later write, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and "May I never boast except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ" and "we are justified by faith and not by works."

He never tacked 95 theses on the door of a church, but when he began proclaiming that message – his intellectual and spiritual gifts being what they were – the world was changed and would never be the same. Besides the Lord Jesus himself, it's not a stretch to say that the apostle Paul is one of, if not the most influential human being who has ever walked the face of the earth. And when Luther began proclaiming that same message 1500 years later with his extraordinary gifts and talents, a similar transformation of the world came to pass. Such is the power of the truth when it lodges in a great heart and is explained and defended by a great mind, and proclaimed by a great voice. *Compared to this truth, to this light, nothing else much matters: not politics, not prosperity, not even religion.* And for that reason, such things figure very little in Paul's preaching and writing as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Two reformations 1500 years apart; each made necessary by the same set of circumstances in the church; each led by a man of genius whose personal experience of encounter with Christ was the source of his message; each resulting in a transformation of the church and of the world; each, alas, leaving still much of the church behind, unwilling, resistant, defiant.

Reformation is something God does: it is, after all, nothing but salvation on a larger scale. That it has happened in the church a number of times and twice in an epoch making way, is proof of the message that was itself recovered in both Reformations: the truth that salvation is of the

Lord! Whether we witness another such Reformation or not, they are sufficient historical demonstrations of that truth everyone must embrace for himself or herself to be saved:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life.”