

Paul's Apostleship and Authority

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Paul's Conversion

Paul did not become an apostle in the same manner as did the rest of the apostles. He is first encountered as Saul at the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. Acts 8:3 says, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison."

Acts 9, however, tells of his dramatic conversion while on the road to Damascus. In Acts 9:15, the Lord said to Ananias regarding Saul, "He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." Acts 22:14-15 records that the Lord, speaking through Ananias said to Paul, "The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard." In Romans 1:1, Paul said he was "called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." After obeying the command to "be baptized, washing away your sins" (Acts 22:16), "immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God"" (Acts 9:20).

Considering his past, it should not be surprising that Paul was not readily accepted by the church. Acts 9:26 says, "And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple." V27 tells how Barnabas convinced the brethren of the validity of Saul's conversion.

Paul Defends His Apostleship

In response to further opposition, 2 Corinthians 10-13 records Paul's determined defense of his apostleship and authority. Apparently there were those who denied that he was truly an apostle. They perhaps wished for a following of their own and thus set out to slander and criticize Paul (see 10:2,7,8,10).

Paul makes several valid points in order to establish his authority:

- 10:14-15 The faith of those in Corinth and the existence of their congregation is clearly indicative of Paul's true apostleship (see Acts 18:1ff; 1 Corinthians 2:1ff; 4:15)
- 11:7-9 He preached without charge (perhaps unlike his opponents) so as not to be a burden to them (mentioned again with irony in 12:13)
- 11:22-28 He boldly (yet reluctantly) describes his credentials (as compared to the claims of his opponents) and enumerates his sufferings for the cause of Christ
- 11:30-12:10 He boasts of weakness, the true characteristic of an apostles (again, as compared to the bold claims of the false apostles); see 4:7-15; 5:11-12; 6:4-10; also 1 Corinthians 4:9-13; even the vision itself was a display of weakness in that he gained nothing he could express (12:4); finally, he was even given a "thorn in the flesh" to ensure his humility as a true servant of the Lord; in 12:11 he states he was compelled to boast because such was the manner of the "most eminent apostles" (false apostles; some suggest they may be identified with the Gnostic false doctrine of superior knowledge)
- 12:12 Paul says that the signs, wonders, and miracles of a true apostle were performed among them (perhaps indicating credit goes to God and the Holy Spirit rather than himself); see also Romans 15:18-19; Galatians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5 concerning such signs accompanying the proclaimed word; the book of Acts records several miracles in connection to Paul (14:8-10; 15:12; 16:16-18; 19:11-12; 20:7-12; 28:1-9)
- 13:10 Paul concludes by clearly stating that his authority as an apostle was given him by the Lord, and that with such he intends to build them up, not tear them down; he has established numerous times his sincere love for them and desire to give of himself for their benefit (12:15)

Despite his blatant defense given to the church in Corinth, Paul was actually very humble about his former way life and subsequent conversion and apostleship. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he wrote, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

He went on to express his thankfulness in v10: “For by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.” He further exhibits his humility in 2 Corinthians 3:5: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.”

Peter Defends Paul’s Apostleship

Probably the greatest proof of Paul’s apostleship and authority is found in 2 Peter 3:15-16. There Peter refers to Paul as “our beloved brother.” He states that Paul wrote “according to the wisdom given him.” Finally, Peter refers to (apparently) a collection of Paul’s letters and calls them “Scripture.” It is true that, in the early church, the term “Scripture” was generally used to refer to that of the Old Testament.

But notice that Peter categorized the writings of Paul in the same class as “the rest of the Scriptures,” thus giving a clear indication that Paul’s writings are indeed truthful and authoritative. (A collection of Paul’s writings commonly known as the Pauline Corpus is dated from early in the 2nd century.)

Jesus said, “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). The apostles would thus be divinely guided by the Holy Spirit in their teaching and writing. The apostle John was inspired when he recorded those words of Jesus. Luke was inspired when he wrote the account of Paul being called to be an apostle. Peter was inspired when he wrote that Paul’s writings were Scripture.

Thus if Paul is not to be accepted as a true apostle and his writings as genuinely inspired, then several other inspired writers must also be shunned. It would be hoped that few would be willing to go to such an extreme.