

CHAPTER III

PAUL'S OFFICE

Paul had no direct contact with Jesus before his experience on the Damascus Road. For all we can tell, this man was a complete stranger to the fellowship that gathered around Jesus before the crucifixion. Who ordered him, and how came he to be acknowledged by churchmen as an apostle on par with the Twelve? There is absolutely no mention of him in the gospels, even in Luke's Gospel, though he may have been in Jerusalem during the periods of Jesus' ministry there. He must, as a student of Gamaliel the great Pharisee teacher, (or so Luke has him saying – Acts 22:3) have been informed of the events surrounding Jesus' arrest and execution. Our first knowledge of him is in the Acts when, during the martyrdom of Stephen, he stood by and held the garments of those who cast the stones. Paul (according to Luke) also confirms his participation in the event, in his defense before the Sanhedrin after being arrested in Jerusalem prior to his first imprisonment in Rome (Acts 22:30). But he was never in the company of Jesus (at least, there is no record of such), and had no association with the Twelve until after his experience on the Damascus Road. He was a complete stranger.

Jesus chose only twelve apostles and named them. Paul was not among them. Then he promised them that they should sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Their number therefore corresponds to the number of the tribes of Israel, and we have no indication that Jesus intended to add others. Of course, Judas' betrayal and demise left only eleven. Could Paul have seen himself as filling the vacancy? No, for he would surely have made that his claim. The fact is that the remaining eleven were instrumental in the selection of Matthias to fill this vacancy as even Luke informs us in The Acts, and had Paul seen himself as being Judas' replacement, Luke would certainly have seen him as such. I believe, nevertheless, that Paul was Judas's successor – as traitor! Judas betrayed him in his flesh; Paul betrayed him in his spirit.

A Clue as to How Paul Viewed His Apostleship

Luke's account of the story of Paul's "revelation" in Acts 9 may give us our first clue as to how Paul conceived his apostleship and justified his claim to that high and exalted position in the fellowship of Jesus. Having been blinded by the brilliant light outside the city of Damascus, he was led into the city where for three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank. Then the Lord appeared to a disciple at Damascus, Ananias by name, and sent him to Paul that he might regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias objected because he had heard of Paul's reputation as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus but the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel . . ." Now, since the twelve Apostles chosen by Jesus already occupied the ministry to the sons of Israel, Paul from the beginning must have seen his ministry as focused on the Gentiles, who were listed first in the heavenly vision to Ananias as recounted by Paul to Luke. Thus Paul, writing in the Galatian letter, recounts his version of a meeting with Peter, James and John in Jerusalem that concluded, according to Paul, with the agreement between them that they (Peter, James and John) would focus their ministry on the circumcised, whereas Paul and Barnabus would go to the Gentiles. Paul says of this meeting:

. . . when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as

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Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7,8).

In writing thus, has he not clearly defined his apostleship, with himself being the apostle to the Gentiles, just as Peter and the others of the Twelve are the apostles to the twelve tribes of the circumcision?

Luke's Background and Relation to Paul

If Luke was a native of Psidian Antioch as David Smith supposes, then the sermon Paul preached there, related by Luke in Acts 13, may have been the very sermon that resulted in Luke's conversion to Jesus. His detailed account of the sermon suggests that he may even have recorded it in short hand as Paul preached, and certainly suggests that he was there and gave careful attention to what was said.

Luke was an uncircumcised Greek and likely was also one of the Gentile "God fearers" attached to the synagogue in Antioch. He was careful to provide clues placing him in the congregation that heard Paul's sermon. He has Paul introducing the sermon with the words,

Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen . . .

Then, at the conclusion of the sermon, Luke writes:

When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the Grace of God.

We are then told that on the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God, but the sight of the multitude aroused the Jews to jealousy so that they contradicted what Paul said. Luke's narrative continues:

And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed (Acts 13:46-48).

A shiver moves down my spine as I realize that Luke may be describing his own conversion!

The Biblical Source of Paul's Commission as Apostle:

Paul's speech to the Jews at Antioch gives intimation of the source of his conviction of his office as Apostle to the Gentiles. He claims a calling that antedates the call of Jesus to the Twelve, as the light for the Gentiles quotation comes from Isaiah 49:6 (this is applied to Jesus in Luke 2:32) and Paul saw it as a special commission directed to him, and perhaps also to Barnabas. A further indication of this comes in Paul's account of his calling in Galatians where we read:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles
. . .

This is again a reference to Isaiah 49, v. 2, where the prophet says,

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The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name, and
v. 5, The Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant . . .

Isaiah 49 further explains Paul's ambition to go to Spain, in its promise to send him to the uttermost parts of the earth, which, in Paul's time, with its Pillars of Hercules, represented the uttermost parts. (Acts 13:47, Isaiah 49:6, repeated below)

Paul surely understood that this was a source of his commission. This shows up in other passages such as Philippians 2:16, where Paul writes of his expectation of being proud of the Philippian Christians on the Day of Christ, when it will be shown that he did not "labor in vain." This expression harks back to Isaiah 49:4: But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God." He seems to have taken this passage as a forewarning to do all in his power to see that his labors were not in vain.

We see this popping up again in I Corinthians, where he wrote:

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.
For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation."

This quotation being, again, from Isaiah 49:8. Paul sees himself as the one called from the womb of his mother and hidden away in the Lord's quiver like a polished arrow (Isaiah 49:2). It is reasonable to suppose that Luke, the young convert, was so powerfully impressed by the words of Paul as to accept this as the authorization of Paul's ministry from the very beginning of his (Luke's) experience with Jesus. There is no good reason to doubt that this was Paul's understanding of his office and apostleship. On this basis he surely saw his apostleship as antedating and therefore superior to that of the Twelve.

Problems with This Conception:

There are a number of problems with this conception of his apostleship, which I list here:

- 1) Paul did not confine his ministry to the Gentiles. He seems rather to have gone first to the synagogue to preach the gospel in every city to which he journeyed, as in Antioch above. He turned to the Gentiles only after the Jews rejected him.
- 2) There is no source other than Paul to confirm this distribution of duties among the apostles. We must assume that what Luke wrote, he received from Paul. There is no record of any confirmation by Peter or any of the Twelve.
- 3) Peter and the others of the Twelve did not confine their mission to the Jews (the circumcision).
- 4) The first opening of the gospel to the Gentiles was made, not through Paul, but by the Holy Spirit working through Peter, as even Luke recounts in Acts when relating the story of the conversion of the centurion, Cornelius. If the calling of the Twelve confined their ministry exclusively to the Jews, why was Peter chosen to call this first Gentile?
- 5) According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had already, long before Paul's conversion, commissioned the twelve (eleven, after Judas' betrayal and prior to the ascension of Matthias) to go to the Gentiles. He said to them, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and Lo! I am with you always to the close of the age (Matthew 28:19,20).
- 6. It requires a great stretch of credulity for us, in the Twenty-first Century, to agree that the Prophet Isaiah in Chapter 49 was speaking beforehand of Paul of Tarsus. It does not

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require a stretch to suspect that the man from Tarsus could see himself prophesied, exalted and identified in the words of the great Prophet, if he was possessed of an highly inflated sense of his own significance. Furthermore, had Paul been the one indicated by the prophet, could we believe that Jesus would not have sought him out in order to confirm and strengthen his mission to the Gentiles, just as he confirmed the Twelve? Paul was only slightly younger than Jesus, and as he said in his defense before the council (Acts 22): I was brought up in this city (Jerusalem), so that Jesus need not have gone far afield to find him.

- 7) Perhaps Luke, in writing The Acts, had forgotten that in his Gospel he has Simeon applying the Isaiah 49:6 prophecy to Jesus. If it applies to Jesus, can it also apply to Paul?
- 8) There is evidence in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that others did not accept his apostleship. This may have included the Twelve. He writes: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord (I Corinthians 9:1,2)." Who are the "others" to whom he is not an apostle? Is it not most likely those whom he designates "the other apostles," Cephas, and the brothers of the Lord, with whom he immediately continues to compare his practices? At the very least, they would be identified with the other disciples at Corinth who, under the influence of Peter, James and the Twelve, were challenging Paul's claim to be an apostle.
- 9) Like a man who feels threatened and who operates from a position of weakness, Paul asserted his calling at the beginning of all his letters except those to the Philippians, the Thessalonians, and Philemon.

All of these factors, plus others that will come to light in the subsequent discussions of Paul's character and doctrine, have led me to the reluctant conclusion that Paul's apostleship was created by himself in spite of his assertions to the contrary.

One of the reviewers of this book makes the following very appropriate comment: "Most interesting to me is how Paul attempted to establish his office as the official emissary of God and Jesus by beginning all his letters with words to the effect, 'Greetings from Paul, God and Jesus,' as if they were a triumvirate."

Yet I cannot see him as an outright charlatan who set out consciously to deceive others and to elevate himself to the head of the Apostolate. He really believed his claims, and so had first deceived himself. I see him as one who was, at a certain level, a man of great integrity who could persuade and deceive others only because he had first persuaded himself, which contributed to the effectiveness of his ministry. He preached in all sincerity what he really believed. Furthermore, a portion of his doctrine is wonderfully and gloriously true, which renders it all the more deceptive as even Paul could have understood from the standpoint of one who could accuse other "apostles" of disguising themselves as "servants of righteousness" (II Corinthians 11:15).