

A Prayer
of Jesus

I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.

CHAPTER IV

PAUL'S CHARACTER

The charge of blasphemy will be lodged at my door by erstwhile fellow churchmen because I have the audacity to find warts on the great Saint Paul. Yet the warts are not hard to find; indeed they stand out clearly once one has gained the freedom to cast a critical eye upon him so that I wonder that I was once so blind. I shall here find fault with him just as he found fault with his fellow disciples. It seems fitting to introduce this chapter by pointing to one character trait -- inconsistency and willingness to compromise on principle, that is prominent in the New Testament. In his angry letter to the Galatian church he wrote:

Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:2-4).

This is his unequivocal assertion of one of his most basic convictions. But look at what he did:

And he came to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek (Acts 16:1-3).

If this isn't inconsistency and compromise, I would not know how to define these things. Of course, one could defend Paul here by saying that the Galatian letter was written long after he had Timothy circumcised, and his views matured during the interval. Let us then say that is the case, and look at the implication: His views changed from one thing to another during the period when he was preaching his gospel throughout the world. The Truth, however, did not change during that period, for that is unchanging. He therefore could not have been preaching the Truth during this period of changing views, yet he claimed to be preaching the same gospel from beginning to end. This leaves us with no basis for believing that he ever preached the True Gospel!

I shall therefore question here many other character traits, such as his humility, his veracity, his integrity, his authenticity; and even his love for his brothers, and the questions begin at the very start of his discipleship -- that is, on the Damascus Road. I feel qualified to start there because I have much in common with him at that point, having had a similar experience. Paul interpreted his experience in a vastly different way, but I suspect his was no less a breakdown than mine. Even his description of it, including the appearance of a bright light that left him blind, shows all the marks of a characteristic hysteria or anxiety attack. His state of mind at the time and his interpretation of the results of the experience are related in Romans 7:14-8:1. These reveal the classic symptoms of hysteria -- of a driven, compulsive neurotic of a man under so much inner tension as to be unable to contain himself and who finally blew up. He was both bound and

drawn by simultaneous commitments to contrary forces and found release just short of insanity. He rendered his own account of this terrible tension in the following words:

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So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:21-25)!

Was His Conversion Described Accurately?

Did he really see a bright light? And did he really hear a voice? I believe he did, although it is questionable that others saw or heard them. The contradictions in the accounts of his revelation are sufficient to cause us to question his objectivity at the moment and his veracity afterwards. In his defense before the Jerusalem crowd as Luke related in Acts 22:9 he said,

Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

But then Luke described Paul's experience in Chapter 9 thusly:

The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. (Acts 9:7)

How was it that Luke recorded so plain a contradiction in one book? Remember that Luke was Paul's frequent companion, his beloved physician and his protege. He may have been present when Paul delivered his defense in Jerusalem but he most certainly heard Paul's own description of the event delivered to him personally. Paul would not have permitted so close a friend and ally to remain ignorant of all the details of his conversion. Luke doubtless heard this story, not once, but many times as, in the company of his mentor, he listened while he related it to other converts and disciples.

This contradiction would seem to have one of at least three possible explanations. Either a later scribe adulterated the text to make a contradiction, or Luke simply erred in recording one or the other of the accounts, or Paul's descriptions of his conversion were contradictory and Luke left them as such, not knowing what else to do.

I favor the last of these because it seems to me most likely in view of what I now understand about Paul. I am not aware that there are any variants that would support the idea of adulterated texts at this point, and I believe Luke to have been too careful an historian to commit such a blatant error. This is not the only inconsistency in Paul's account of the Damascus Road experience and the events following. I will point out another very significant one below.

Other Explanations for Paul's Experience

Perhaps, like Martin Luther, he was literally near-struck by a bolt of lightning. I could believe that he was so struck, and that it was the event that ruptured his psyche so that he interpreted it as he did, as a revelation of Christ. But this is not necessary; when a man is in such terrible inner tension as his, no external stimuli is necessary to spark his psychic explosion. Another thing that is worth noting about Paul's experience, or "conversion" as the churchmen are prone to call it, is that we have no witnesses to the event other than Paul. I have already emphasized this, and will continue to do so. It was conveniently far from the city of Jerusalem and far removed from the presence of any disciple of Jesus. We might cite Ananias of Damascus as a witness, if not of the event it self, then of its significance. But alas! There is no other mention of this man in the New Testament, either by Paul or others. Now, I don't doubt that there was such a man, or that he was a disciple in the fellowship of Jewish believers in Damascus; but if we could have heard his testimony, we would most likely have received a much different view than the one expressed by Paul. We might cite others among the disciples at Damascus. Alas, not one is named and Paul

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never again refers to this group in his epistles. So, we are free to question whether such disciples and such a man as Ananias really existed. However, there is nothing to be gained by pursuing this question since we have no way to provide a sure answer.

The Character Questions

The contradictory descriptions of Paul's Damascus Road experience, together with other questionable considerations and the fact that we have no witnesses other than Paul himself are enough to lead us on to ask more penetrating questions about his character. I list here six such questions and proceed in the chapters to follow to show how each question is fully justified by the evidence before us.

1. Was he capable of errors in doctrine?
2. Was he capable of misquoting scripture to support his position? Did he tamper with God's word?
3. Was he capable of errors in logic?
4. Was he capable of disobeying commandments of Jesus?
5. Was he capable of lying?
6. Was he capable of self-aggrandizement?