

Chapter V

DID PAUL ERR IN DOCTRINE?

If Paul was capable of such errors, and if this can be reasonably demonstrated, his position as a valid apostle and slave of Jesus becomes questionable. Here we will not pursue a general investigation of his doctrine; we only answer the question, "Could he err in doctrine?" It will be difficult to demonstrate conclusively that any doctrine is false on the basis of mere interpretation, since the errors of the interpreter may be dominant. There is only one doctrinal category that falls outside this qualification, that which relates directly to known history, so that we are forced to resort to interpretive tests of validity unless history can prove our case.

The Lord is at Hand!

I will here demonstrate that he erred in a single doctrine as established by history. Neither was this an insignificant doctrine, for it clearly fueled much of his faith and belief and was the primary inspiration for many other teachings. A.N. Wilson has categorized it as the fundamental doctrine (Paul, the Mind of the Apostle, p 177). This was his doctrine of the Parousia, the eminent return of the Lord to the earth, which he expected at any moment. This doctrine appears repeatedly throughout his epistles. Here are some examples:

- The Lord is at hand (Phil. 4:5).
- . . . so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 1:7).
- Lo, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed (I Cor. 15:51).
- For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep . . . For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord (I Thes. 4:15-17).
- I think that in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away (I Cor. 7:26-31).
- Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our

PAUL: THE STRANGER

instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come (I Cor. 10:11).

So, Paul's firm conviction was that the Lord was at hand, that we shall not all sleep, that the form of this world is passing away and that *we who are alive shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air*. He also believed the appointed time has grown very short, and it was upon him and his disciples that the end of the ages had come. His use of the first person pronoun makes it certain that he understood he would be among those yet living on the day of the Lord, the day of Christ at the end of the age. Such errors as represented by the statement, "We shall not all sleep," are certainly correctly categorized as errors, for none of those to whom he wrote failed to sleep the sleep of death.

Yes, he was certainly in error; had such an event transpired in his lifetime or at any time since, history would surely have known of it and this world would have passed away long ago. We would not be here to discuss these things! Our existence, and the existence of a history that knows nothing of the end of an age, of a day of the Lord, or any other event associated with the Parousia proves conclusively that this was an erroneous doctrine. If this doctrine on which he placed so much weight was erroneous, then may not much more be erroneous?

The Source

What was the source of this idea? It was a key point in his gospel, and he was very specific about the source of the whole:

The gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel, for I did not receive it from man nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Are we to believe that Jesus communicated directly to Paul the doctrine of his return to earth in Paul's lifetime? He said above, ". . . this I declare unto you by the word of the Lord." If so, Jesus was also mistaken. But in this case, Jesus can no more be identified with Truth.

I much prefer some other option, such as that Paul was the one mistaken; that he had visions during which he believed he was communicating with Jesus, when he actually was not. He therefore received his gospel, not from Jesus, but from whatever source it was that communicated with him during his visions. This is not the place to expand on the significance of this. Here it is only necessary to demonstrate that Paul could be in error in a case in which we can be certain he erred, for this alone is sufficient to justify our questioning everything he taught about Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Paul's belief in the imminent return of Christ was a primary conviction that motivated much of his teaching and was basic to his entire approach to life. Believing the form of this world was to end any day, he saw no need to deal with anything that anticipated a lengthy future. Therefore he counseled all to order their lives in the light of this imminent event. This accounts for such passages as I Cor. 7:26-31 listed above. Why seek a wife when the house is afire and the roof caving in? Why plan for tomorrow's meals when we will not be here to eat them? Why revolt against the Romans when the Lord was to deal with them any day? Why seek anything from this world in the future, when neither it, nor we, will be here? Under this conviction, one can only prepare for the expected event, keep oneself unspotted from the world, and, as Paul elsewhere counseled, seek those things that are above. The heavenly Glory becomes the only significant reality, the only consideration for planning today! So, Paul's doctrine of Jesus' soon coming was clearly erroneous, being falsified by two thousand years of history. There were many other doctrinal errors that we will bring to light when we come to Book III, where we will compare some of Paul's specific doctrines with that of Jesus.