

The Church: Guardian of the Truth (Part 2)

Last time, we surveyed the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament in an attempt to answer the question; “To whom has God entrusted the protection and promotion of truth?” In the process, we utilized the two major aspects of this responsibility, the positive proclamation and application of God’s truth and the negative confrontation of errors both in thought and in life. What we discovered was that there is abundant evidence that the visible, corporate church in general, and the divinely commissioned and gifted representatives in particular, are God’s primary agents to fulfill this calling.

When it comes to this calling, one name in particular stands above the rest, one person whose life and teaching were exemplary, namely the Apostle Paul. Let us review his life and ministry, paying particular attention to his understanding of the church’s responsibility in this area. We will proceed as follows: First, we will explore the impact of truth upon the person of Saul of Tarsus. Then we will observe its impact upon his subsequent ministry for Jesus Christ. Finally, in a future article, we will focus our attention on his authorization and instruction of the church in her ongoing responsibility to guard the truth.

Captured and Commissioned to Serve the Truth

We will begin where the Scriptures first introduce us to Paul, not as the great apostle, but as Saul of Tarsus, persecutor and enemy of the church. Turning to the end of the seventh chapter of Acts, we meet Saul at the trial of Stephen, the first martyr of the New Testament church. Saul not only assisted in the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58), but he was emboldened to zealously wreck havoc on the church, “*entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.*” (Acts 8:3) and, “*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem*” (Acts 9:1-2). The apostle later reflected upon the intensity of this zeal when he stated in his letter to the Galatians; “*how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it*” (Gal. 1:13). Furthermore, he declared near the end of his life that he was “the chief of sinners” because he attacked the church while she was in her infancy (1 Tim. 1:13-15). Yet, according to God’s predetermined plan and purpose, this great persecutor of the church would become one of her greatest defenders.

At the very height of Saul’s rage against the church, a rage that oddly enough was incited by a desire to defend the truth as he understood it, our Lord Jesus Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus and enlightened him concerning his great error. This encounter with the risen Christ had such an impact upon his life that he returned to it numerous times both as a comfort and as a confirmation of his calling. Besides the actual event recorded in chapter 9, Luke recorded two other times that Saul, who later took the name Paul, recounted this event and especially the words of Christ. Because they bear directly upon our study of Saul, we must take a moment and review all three of them now.

Our Lord Jesus sent His disciple Ananias to Saul to restore his sight that was taken from him during the confrontation on the road. In the process, He declared that Saul was “*a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake*” (Acts 9:15-16). This calling was fulfilled in the subsequent life and ministry of the Apostle, especially the aspect of suffering for Christ’s name. As a matter of fact, Paul referred to this suffering as one of the distinguishing marks of an apostle.¹ Next, his experience was

¹ “For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men” (1 Corinthians 4:9).

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recounted during his defense before the angry mob at the temple in Jerusalem. Using the words of Ananias, Paul declared that he was called to be Christ's "*witness to all men of what you have seen and heard*" (Acts 22:15). Notice that this calling as witness² to all men included the Gentiles, and when Paul explained this to the crowd, they became further agitated and cried out for his execution. Finally, during his defense before King Agrippa, Paul quoted the full account of Christ's call to him; "*rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me*" (Acts 26:16-18). It is important to consider at this point the dual role of minister and witness. A witness is one who speaks concerning the things he knows and the primary meaning of the word translated 'minister' is "one who acts under the orders of another to carry out his will."³ In other words, an authorized representative. That Paul understood the function of these two terms is evident in his use of the titles 'apostle' and 'servant of Jesus Christ' in the majority of his epistle. To summarize, Paul was commissioned by the risen Savior to bear witness to His name (person and works) by word and deed.

Carrying out his Commission to Promote and Guard the Truth

After many years of preparation in his home town of Tarsus, the Lord, through Barnabus, brought Paul to serve the newly established church in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:25-26). Paul and Barnabus were numbered among the prophets and teachers of the church when the Holy Spirit directed the church leaders to "*Separate to Me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them*" (Acts 13:2). Thus began Paul and Barnabus' first missionary journey, a journey full of many perils and great success. Through it all, "*the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region (of Galatia)*" (Acts 13:49). But not only did Paul and Barnabus proclaim and teach the truth of the Gospel, they also confronted error in its many forms such as the words of the false prophet Bar-Jesus (Acts 13:6f) or the words of the Jews who rejected the Gospel and stirred up persecution (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:5, 19). It was during this time that Paul declared that he had reached a major turning point in his ministry, specifically that the Gentiles would be the primary focus of his attention and work (Acts 13:46-47). But unfortunately, even among these people, he faced great challenges due to their many errors in thought and life (Acts 14:18).

Not soon after his return to Antioch from the regions of Galatia, Paul was embroiled in a controversy with the Judaizers, those who demanded that the Gentile believers must be circumcised in order to be considered part of the covenant people of God. He was one of those who opposed this error and was asked to convey this dispute to the first synod of the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15). Guided to some degree by the testimony of God's work through Paul's ministry and that of the Apostle Peter, the church established a directive for the Gentile churches to follow. Soon after the Synod had concluded, we find Paul embarking upon a journey to confirm the newly established Gentile churches in the truth secured at the Synod. It was on this journey that the truth of the Gospel was spread into Macedonia and Greece. Paul utilized various opportunities to preach and teach such as prayer meetings (Acts 16:13), a jail and the jailer's house in Philippi (Acts 16:25-32), synagogues (Acts 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4), market places (Acts 17:17), and even the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17:19f). He also confronted error when it reared its

² the Greek word translated "witness" is the basis for the English word "martyr"

³ From Timothy Friberg's *Analytical Lexicon of New Testament Greek*. He adds the following: "as those who work with Christ to accomplish his purposes *trusted servant, minister, assistant*" (1Cor. 4.1).

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ugly head.⁴ Paul even spent a year and a half (an unusually long time for him to stay in one place) in the wicked city of Corinth, in order to establish and strengthen that church in the truth of the Gospel.

Paul's third missionary journey was also filled with the same two fold work of the proclamation of truth and the confrontation of error. The major difference of this journey as compared to the first two is that he spent most of his time in the city of Ephesus (a strategic center of outreach to Asia Minor). Luke summarized the success of this ministry thus, "*So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed*" (Acts 19:20). During this time we also find Paul effectively utilizing the gifts and calling of other servants of Christ to minister to the churches, both in Ephesus and beyond (Acts 19:22).⁵ At the same time, due to his great love and concern for the larger church, he personally revisited the churches in Macedonia and Greece, exhorting and strengthening them in the faith (Acts 19:20; 20:1f). At the end of his time in Asia, Paul called the elders of the church together, summarized the extent of his ministry among them, and charged them to fulfill their responsibility to promote and guard the truth with these words; "*Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*" (Acts 20:28-32).

Although the Lord greatly used the apostle's physical presence to establish and strengthen the church, Paul's most enduring legacy which continues to guide the church throughout the millennia are his letters recorded in the New Testament. It is interesting to note that even while the New Testament was still being written, these epistles were already recognized as Holy Scripture.⁶ Paul's epistles to the church can be divided into three groups based upon our two-fold premise. First, there are those that are primarily written as a straightforward presentation of truth. Although in the process many errors are overturned, yet Paul's main concern is positive proclamation rather than negative confrontation. These would include his letters to the churches in Rome, Ephesus, and Colosse.⁷ On the other side of the spectrum are His letter to the Galatians as well as both letters to the church in Corinth. In these, Paul addressed a diverse errors in theology or practice.⁸ The rest of his letters to the churches consist of a mixture of these two aspects.⁹ To summarize, in order to promote and protect His truth, our Lord chose to use men like Paul, authorized them to be His representatives (apostles), and communicated His truth through their lives and through their spoken and written word. They were given to the church (Eph. 4:11) to function as her foundation, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

⁴ For example, see Acts 16:16-18

⁵ As we will later observe, this act of preparing and sending men, following the example of the Lord Jesus, will become one of the most important ways that the church is able to continue her responsibility of guarding and promoting the truth.

⁶ See 2 Peter 15-16

⁷ As an example, the epistle to the Ephesians can be divided into two sections. In the first half, Paul expounds the glorious truth of the Gospel and the blessings of those who are in Christ. In the second half, beginning in chapter four he then applies this truth to their lives, calling them to "*walk worthy of the calling with which you were called*" (Eph. 4:1).

⁸ Consider the epistle to the Galatians. It can be divided into three sections. In the first section, Paul vindicates his authority and more importantly the truth of the Gospel which he had brought to them through a review of his life and divine calling (chapters one and two). Then in the second section, through careful exegesis of a host of Scriptural texts, he presents an excellent theological case for the true Gospel (chapters three and four). Finally, he presents practical arguments and instructions for living according to the truth (chapters five and six).

⁹ Philippians, First and Second Thessalonians and for those who hold that the apostle Paul wrote the epistle of Hebrews, it would also be included in this category.

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Furthermore, the apostle Paul wrote important letters to individuals such as Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.¹⁰ Paul had sent two of these men to serve the churches of Asia Minor (Timothy) and the island of Crete (Titus). Due to the nature of the situations that these two men faced, Paul provided valuable guidance and instruction that not only assisted the churches of that era, but throughout the subsequent life and ministry of the church. In the next article we will concentrate our attention on specific portions of these letters that address the ongoing responsibility of the church to guard and promote the truth.

S.D.G.

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¹⁰ The letters to Timothy and Titus have been traditionally referred to as the Pastoral Epistles.