

Week 2

Consider the following concerns: Is the church moving in directions the Council never intended? Was the Council a big mistake? Has the church lost its sense of tradition? Does church unity demand uniformity? Is pluralism harming the church? Are mixed loyalties dividing the church? Who exercises legitimate authority in the church?

You might think that these concerns are taken from the pages of current religious newspapers and magazines that chronicle contemporary church issues. In fact, they are all taken from the letters of St. Paul and supplemented with material from the Acts of the Apostles. Here the issue is not the Second Vatican Council or the General Synod of the Church of England, but the many challenges surrounding the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and St. Paul's subsequent mission to the Gentiles as narrated in his letters contained in the New Testament. (See Acts 15:1,2). Stronger personalities you will not find than those appearing in these letters. Every person and group involved is absolutely convinced that their position is firmly rooted in the authentic message of Jesus Christ. And still, they are at odds and sometimes in very serious conflict.

St. Paul was the first of the New Testament writers – he died in AD 62 before the first Gospel was written. A close reading of the Pauline material reveals that for Paul the resurrection of Jesus had nothing to do with the later stories that portrayed Easter in terms of the physical resuscitation of Jesus. Resurrection, for Paul, had to do first with God affirming Jesus' life (Rom.1: 1 – 4), and then with God opening the minds and eyes of the disciples to see who Jesus was – an experience that caused Paul to say, “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). Paul also said that God would raise us in the same way that God raised Jesus (1 Cor. 15: 1 f). In fact miracles do not appear to be part of the earliest memory the church had of Jesus. There are no miracles recorded in the Pauline material. He had, for example little to say about the birth of Jesus, save one reference to Jesus being ‘born of a woman’ (Galatians 4:4). Hence it is unlikely that St. Paul knew anything of the ‘virgin birth’ of Jesus or if he did, he certainly didn't think it to be of great importance. Does this bring Jesus down to being simply another prophet?

<Pause for thought and check Bible readings.>

St. Paul, known before his conversion as Saul of Tarsus, was brought up as an orthodox Jew. The religion from which Paul was converted is described in the Acts of the Apostles as the “straitest sect”, We see it through his eyes as a rather repellent puritanical system, severely legalistic and ridden with nationalist prejudice. Paul describes himself as a Pharisee; but not all Pharisees were as strict as he was. It appears that this Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, was engaged by the religious hierarchy of the day, to seek out the groups of people who were meeting together in one another's houses to share in the teaching of one Jesus of Nazareth, whom they proclaimed as the Messiah, and to report them to headquarters. (See Acts 7:54 – 8:1). Such groups were regarded as subversive and dangerous not only to the High Priest but also to the Roman occupying army. Saul however experienced a moment of blinding vision whilst on the road to Damascus; an experience which changed him forever. His conversion is reported by St. Luke in the ‘Acts of the Apostles’. (Acts 9:1 – 5) . Consequently, Saul, now renamed Paul, reacted against the fundamentalism of his youth in

some extreme ways. Consider some of his outbursts of anger against the extreme inwardness of his contemporary Jews. Writing in about 50 AD he rages against the Jews in Galatia and then Philippias;

'I wish that those who are disturbing you might go even further and castrate themselves.
(Gal. 5: 12)

'Look out for the dogs – look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.' (Phil. 3:2)

The earliest incidents in church history reveal an uncomfortable tension. Paul had become a leading member of the church in Antioch for some years, and the mission there had been successful in converting some Gentiles (non-Jews) to the Christian faith. The Jerusalem mission on the other hand, headed by Jesus' central disciples, Peter, James and John, and by Jesus' family, his brothers James, Jude and the others, were disapproving of Paul's liberal attitude to the gentiles. The question had then arisen as to how much of the Jewish Law these gentile converts needed to keep; and Paul had adopted a liberal policy – roughly speaking they had to keep the moral commandments, but he turned a blind eye over the ritual laws. This decision then led to a series of difficult incidents, which he records in the letter he wrote to the Galatian churches in central Turkey. The first of these incidents happened a dozen or so years after his conversion.

'Fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went because God revealed to me that I should go. In a private meeting with the leaders, I explained the gospel message that I preach to the gentiles. I did not want my work in the past or in the present to be a failure. My companion Titus, even though he is Greek, was not forced to be circumcised, although some wanted it done. Pretending to be fellow believers these men slipped into our group as spies, in order to find out about the freedom we have through our union with Christ. They wanted to make slaves of us, but in order to keep the truth of the gospel safe for you, we did not give in to them for a minute.
(see Galatians 2 : 1 – 4).

The 'false brethren' were Christians from Jerusalem, 350 miles away. They had been sent to see what was going on at Antioch. When they realised that the Antioch church was not observing the Jewish Law (especially concerning diet) they raised an objection. Paul refused to change his church's ways, and regarded them as having deceived him

The 'false brethren' then reported the lax ways of the Antioch church to the Jerusalem apostles, who wanted proper order to be maintained. Paul saw trouble coming and took Barnabas and Titus with him to negotiate a settlement. He saw James (Jesus' brother), Peter and John, and he speaks of them in rather sarcastic tones. ('those who are reputed to be something ...).

The Jerusalem meeting was in fact friendly, and the cracks were papered over (rather like General Synod), but the tension continued. (Gal. 2: 11 – 14).

Paul's letters reflect his experience; and his experience was the epitome of the revolution which Christ wrought in religion. In the long run, the Paulines won, and Christians

today do not have to eat kosher meat or be circumcised. In consequence gentile Christians today usually sympathise with Paul, and are apt to speak of the Jerusalem Christians attitude as legalistic nonsense. Indeed the description 'Pharisee' is now used in common parlance to denote one who puts law before grace. But if we are to follow the story with an open mind, we must be fair to James and Peter. If the Bible is believed to be the word of God, then it is

not for you to say which of God's rules are to be obeyed and which can be taken lightly. Leviticus 17 : 14 says that you may not eat blood in your meat – that is the end of the matter.

Although the issue about Jewish practice has faded away in the Christian church, the point about interpreting the scriptures has not – neither have the divisions between different denominations of the church. It is not inevitable, for example, that there should be bad blood in England between black and white, English and Welsh, Jew and Gentile. But a visit to Ulster should open the eyes a bit. The story of the Englishman who visited Belfast is symbolic, if apocryphal. The reporter asked him, ' Are you a catholic or a protestant?' After a moment the man replied, ' I am an atheist.' To which the reporter continued, ' Yes, but are you a catholic atheist or a protestant atheist?'. There are some divisions which persist for years if not centuries. The Jewish Christians (Petrine) continued to hate the Christians from Antioch (Pauline) and vice versa. The issue of the Law was not the only difference between the parties. To understand this and other issues and how they arose, is to understand the New Testament.

<Questions for discussion>

- 1 Paul does not appear to believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. (Galatians 4:4) Does this disqualify him as a member of your Church?
- 2 The Christian Church appears to be split into many different denominations. Is this a good thing?
- 3 Was Paul right in claiming that he had seen the risen Christ? (1 Cor. 9:1)
