

# God's wisdom 05-02-2023

What do we really know about the apostle Paul? Apostle? It's a title to which he lays claim. On what basis does he make such a claim? A vision? A conversation?

These days we would say Paul is an enigma. We don't know quite what to make of him. In his time the same would have been said of him.

Imagine the budding church in Jerusalem. They are trying to make sense of things -- as well as trying to make ends meet. They see themselves as Jews: Why wouldn't they? Jesus was a Jew after all and the people he mixed with were Jews! Amongst his disciples there was (probably) not a single non-Jew. Nobody expected the new collection of Jesus-followers to be made up of anything but Jews.

Then, in comes Paul, bringing his reputation with him. Paul the scourge of the Christians. Imagine their expressions. The cheek of the man! Some are angry. Some are confused. Some are afraid. The fox has come into the chicken coop.

"Don't worry", says Paul. "That was then, this is now. I've come from Damascus. I've come to help! I've had a vision there - a flash of light, so to speak. Blinding (literally)! And Jesus and I had a chat, and he told me that I am to be an apostle to -- wait for it -- the gentiles"

"No way" says James (Jesus' brother) and the Jerusalem mob. "Jesus' Way — Jesus' Message is for card-carrying Jews only". "Well, let me have a try", says Paul. "Let's see if a mission to the gentiles makes sense and, anyway, that's what I've been told to do by Jesus himself. Have any of you spoken to Jesus himself lately? No? Well, there you are then. I'm more of an apostle than any of you".

So, off he goes and soon we find him in Corinth. Corinth, a major trading and cultural centre. From the town and the marketplace you can't help but look up at the hill behind the town, the Acropolis, where a plethora of Gods, both Greek and Roman are given due honour. A cosmopolitan place. A place where new ideas can be voiced, and tried -- and put aside.

In Corinth Paul sets up a congregation of (one assumes), mostly Greeks. That's about as Gentile as you can get. In modern terms, Paul "plants" a church. In our time, church-planting is a bit of an industry. Anyway that's going to be his thing, his "*shtick*" He wanders far and wide, planting here, planting there.

But he can't be everywhere at once, and so he writes follow-up letters. Most of what we know about Paul and his congregations is found in those letters — seven of them in particular. Now there's one thing we need to remind ourselves of from time to time, and that is that most of what he knows about Jesus came to him in that visionary flash on the outskirts of Damascus. Not all of it, of course - he had also learned from others, but Paul is at pains to point out that Jesus is his source, Paul is not depending on many, if any, written sources. The Gospels had not as yet been written. He did not know about Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Paul's writings are the first recorded introduction to Jesus, but they lack the narrative quality of the Gospels. They lack the immediacy of accounts of Jesus' words and deeds,

So, when Paul talks about Jesus he is claiming to have got it straight from the horse's mouth. That is an extraordinary claim, is it not? It's not surprising that the folk back in Jerusalem were skeptical. Paul brings with him not just a report of a visionary meeting, but a whole heap of learning - including about the crucifixion and the resurrection - about the resurrection he had, of course, first-hand evidence. But

Paul makes up for lack of stories with a whole heap of Theology. Paul is more concerned with what Jesus means than with what we says and does.

Paul was, of course, a Jew and an educated Jew at that. He can read and write. He knows the Hebrew scriptures Back to front, inside out. He reads and writes Greek and he is a Roman citizen! So, we might say, Paul is the right man for the job. And, while he has disciples, and acolytes and companions he is, essentially, a loner. We have no way to check on what he says - except by prayer. So when Paul gives advice to the people at Corinth we hear him as a person claiming authority.

The Corinthians, as we have come to call them, have been suffering from mixed messages. Some amongst them had laid claims to know what the faith was all about and that they had the stuff of leadership. Although no shrinking violet himself, Paul is pretty much convinced that this sort of behaviour is going to get them nowhere fast. Paul, responds, albeit from afar, that the faith is not about power and influence. The faith is about Jesus who died a miserable and unfair death on the cross, and who lives on in our hearts and in the world. The world is a better place because of this, and we are better people because of it. Because of those events new life is possible.

You might want to try to imagine what effect this bit of theology might have had on the Corinthian church. "What are you saying, Paul. We thought this church was about cozy community; about sharing and being nice and supporting each other in times of trial. It's a rough and tumble world out there, Paul, where dog is eating dog. That sort of stuff we understand, but now you tell us that it's not about us but about what God is like and what He has done for us without us asking. What sort of ridiculous message is that? Cozy community? Yes. Service? Yes. Putting others first? Of course! Jesus dying and rising and saving. Now that's not going to build a church — surely".

We are not in such a different situation now. We are living through the decline of our church; through the decline of THE church. Perhaps we are living through the decline of our civilization. We have been seduced into thinking that chumminess and community is the answer. If we get that right they will come flocking back.

Right?

WRONG!

Will they come back to a redeemed church ready to rescue the world? Well, perhaps. It seems like it's worth a try.

I like to pose the question: What is the difference between the church and a *Probus* club? What is the difference between the church and a *Lions* or *Rotary* club. They all exist to serve. They all provide community. What's the difference? I will leave you with the question. Perhaps in looking for an answer you might look to Paul for a clue.

*"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"— 10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.*

May it be so.