

Paul --The Agitator

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"But they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed upon him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon the Lord, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:57-59).

This is our introduction to Saul of Tarsus, chief of sinners, who afterward became Paul, the apostle, chief of missionaries. Bitter war was raging between Judaism and Christianity and Saul sat high in the councils of Judaism. Judaism was materialism and its weapons were carnal. When argument did not suffice, it took up the sword. Christianity was a spiritual system whose adherents used words for weapons, fled before the sword or died praying for their enemies. He that was born after the flesh was persecuting him that was born after the Spirit (Gal. 4:28-31). The struggle was to end in the casting out of the handmaid and her son, the overthrow of Judaism and the triumph of the gospel, but not until Saul of Tarsus changed sides.

A Battle Royal

Two giants met when Stephen met Saul. Christianity and Judaism were respectively personified in these two. Stephen stood at bay before the council where he had been forcibly brought. He was assailed by perjured testimony and looked about into faces distorted by hate and scorn and the lust to kill. He asked no favors and offered no compromises. He accepted an opportunity to speak and his fiery words were a welcome address to martyrdom. "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? and they killed them that showed before of the coming of the Righteous One; of whom ye have now become betrayers and murderers; ye who received the law as it was ordained by angels, and kept it not" (Acts 7:51-53). The result was characteristic of Judaism. "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon the Lord, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The manner in which Stephen met death was characteristic of the spirit of the gospel, as was also the bold manner in which he challenged it. Anyone who thinks that Stephen made a mistake in his methods, knows little or nothing of the spirit of the gospel. "And Saul was consenting unto his death."

The Crusading Saul

Saul of Tarsus was a religious fanatic. In his eyes Christians were traitors to Judaism, vile ones at that, and had forfeited their right to life or liberty. He was the natural leader of a sinister movement to destroy the church. "But Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house, and dragging men and women committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). "But Saul, yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord . . ." (Acts 9:1). When they were put to death he gave his vote against them. He punished them in the synagogues and sought to make them blaspheme. He was exceedingly mad against them and persecuted them even unto foreign cities (Acts 26:9-11). In all this Saul had a religious motive. He was moved by a deep sense of right. He thought he "ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." He was "zealous for God" (Acts 22:3).

Saul could not kill Christianity. Nobody could. He was fighting against God. It would be natural to conclude that such a monster was unfit to live and his bloody career should be ended summarily by violence. Christians do not end careers that way. They were afraid of Saul and fled before his volcanic wrath but they scattered the gospel as they went and scores of churches sprang up to take the place of one which was the victim of Saul's havoc. Saul did not put out the fire, he only scattered it. It could not be put out for God had kindled it.

Something was obviously wrong with Saul. It was not his boundless energy or his crusading spirit. It was not his zeal or his passion for conquest. These forces are right within themselves. His faith was wrong, he was on the wrong side and consequently misusing his powers. It isn't wrong to be an agitator, but the wrong thing can be agitated and wrong methods can be used. Saul was campaigning "ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tim. 2:13). An enlightened faith on the wings of such tumultuous energy was destined to carry Saul where Stephen would undoubtedly have gone had he lived. Stephen was not a soft man nor was Saul. When the Lord called Saul by his grace, he did not destroy the spirit of the agitator, he directed it into new channels.

The Invincible Paul

Saul changed sides and became Paul the apostle. He is still the irrepressible agitator. He continued to lay waste and make havoc wherever he went AND HE ALWAYS WENT. His body might languish behind

bars, but bars could not confine his agitation. In Rome it flowed out to infect the whole praetorian guard and inflame into boldness the timid hearts of disciples throughout the city (Phil. 1:12, 13). His weapons were no longer carnal but spiritual and proved to be far more powerful. At the end of a few years he could say triumphantly that all creation under heaven had heard the gospel (Col. 1:23). Immediately after his conversion he walked boldly into the synagogue and preached Christ to his enemies with the same boldness Stephen had used when he was dragged before the council.

Much of the history of the early church is epitomized in the life of Paul. Its struggles and triumphs are seen in him. The marks of Jesus branded on his body are symbols of its struggle, while the faith that burned in his soul are symbols of its triumph. A believer in Christ and His resurrection, he lent unwavering fidelity to the fundamentals of the faith. The two outstanding enemies of the gospel in Paul's day were paganism and Judaism and he met both, in the church and out, with unconcealed hostility. NO ONE EVER DOUBTED WHAT SIDE PAUL WAS ON. As is always the case with such intense agitators, HE MADE LOYAL FRIENDS AND BITTER ENEMIES. His friends were willing to share his prison life and follow him even to death. His enemies were capable of binding themselves with an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had killed him. Slander was one of their mildest weapons. The pagan governor, Felix, was terrified as Paul preached to him of righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25). His successor, Festus, classified him as a fanatic, and accused him of madness, in the midst of one of his most eloquent appeals for the truth of the gospel (Acts 26:24). The spokesman of Judaism called him "a pestilent fellow, and a mover of insurrections among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ring-leader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). In Thessalonica, the Jews said: "These that have turned the world upside down have come hither also." Their wrath was directed mainly at Paul. They did not act without provocation. Believing as they did, they were logical in their attitude. Paul cut deep with the sword of the Spirit and drew blood with every thrust. Indeed, he did turn the world upside down! Wherever he went, he found things downside up and he proceeded to turn them. What a man! On a casual visit through Athens, his spirit was moved within him as he beheld the city full of idols. He could not keep quiet. He preached in the synagogues and disputed in the marketplace. He got called "this babbling" for his pains and was dubbed "a setter forth of strange gods," but the mockery drew from him a masterpiece of eloquence against idolatry. Wherever he went, he shattered alike the citadels of idolatry and the foundations of Judaism. This moving, exploding ambassador for Christ is the wonder of the

centuries.

The Intolerant Agitator

The converts to Christianity who composed the early church were formerly Jews or pagans. The influence then of both Judaism and paganism were to be reckoned with in the church itself. Paul sternly declared that Christians were washed of the uncleanness of paganism and a continuance of their iniquities would bar them from heaven. He had little patience with Judaizers who would bind the yoke of Jewish bondage on the church. "Ye are severed from Christ, ye who would be justified by the law; ye are fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). He was ever the perennial, intolerant agitator for gospel principles. He made one scornful remark that even modern friends of Paul have sought to soften, because in their eyes it borders on an obscene jest. Surely, no sweet-spirited, soft-talking compromiser of the gospel would have made it. "I would that they that unsettle you would even go beyond circumcision" (Gal. 5:12). He wished that those who preached circumcision would preach mutilation, the cutting off of the member that was circumcised. It would always serve the cause of truth if the protagonists of error would go to such absurd lengths as to discredit themselves before all. But Satan is a wily antagonist. "For even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light. It is no great thing therefore if his ministers also fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness." Paul's hardest task was to strip the sheep's clothing from the wolf so he could be seen in his naked character.

If godly, able men today find it in their hearts to become agitators for the truth of the gospel and find themselves afire with zeal to combat false doctrine, impure worship and worldliness in the church, they can find a worthy exemplar in Paul, the fieriest of agitators. When fundamentals were at stake, he was not a wire-walker.

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