

*Take Me to Your Leader*

St. Paul the pastor had a disagreement with the church establishment, and it's a battle that still rages today. The crux of the conflict was this: Who is the head of the church? Who leads a congregation? I know of a bishop who once put that question to a congregation at a special congregational meeting. The first answer offered was "The pastor." But no, it's the pastor. Then someone said, "Bishop, it's you." But the bishop acknowledged it wasn't him. Some one said "The Council." But it's not the Council either. Sure he had come upon the right answer, someone shouted out. "It's all of us, it's the people." But that was incorrect too. Finally, the pastor spoke up, "It is our Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus is the head of our church." And that is the correct answer. You can look it up in your constitutions and your Bibles. No single human being or group of human beings leads the church. Jesus Christ is our leader; he is the head of our church.

St. Paul was angry, in fact, he was hopping mad, because the church in Galatia that he had founded had abandoned the lordship of Jesus Christ as their head and had adulterated the pure gospel he had preached to them. False teachers had come into the congregation and challenged Paul's authority, saying that he did not have the support or approval of the established religious organization. They said that Paul had "gone rogue," that his teaching was not within the required guidelines as stated by the Christian leadership at its headquarters in Jerusalem, and that they had authority from the apostles and bishops to correct Paul's errors. Yeah, right. As if Paul's theology was wrong.

St. Paul did not take such criticism lightly. He took it personally, on his own behalf, and on behalf of Christ. Paul's life, his authority as an apostle, and the gospel of Jesus Christ he preached were all one and the same thing. Christianity was not a hobby for him. It was not something he volunteered for so it would look good on his resume when he went looking for a real job. Church work was not something Paul did in the leisure time of his

“golden years” to fill up the hours. Christian mission was a matter of life and death for Paul, and not so much his own life and death – Paul cared little about his own earthly life and death – rather Paul’s concern was for the eternal life and death of those people he loved, both Jews and Gentiles. Paul was all about rescuing the lost and bringing people to saving faith in Christ. Paul had no time for the petty games, trivial matters, and superfluous agendas that become obsessions for so many people.

St. Paul had taken the gospel from its place of origin, in the heart of Palestinian Judaism, into the world of the Gentiles, the pagans, the uncircumcised. He preached that we are saved by grace through faith, and not by works of the law. Jesus’ death and resurrection has made possible, he said, the salvation of all people, whether they be Jew, or Gentile, or whatever. Paul did not overturn God’s law. He knew Jesus to be the fulfillment of that law. He recognized the power of that law to show us the iniquity of our sin and the power of the law to order society in a more equitable way. But, Paul also knew that the law alone could never save us, it could never give us eternal life. Only Christ alone could do that, so Paul preached Christ, and him crucified.

St. Paul’s authority and commission to preach and teach did not come from any human being or from any earthly authority. Paul was called and ordained by Jesus Christ himself. It was not St. Peter or any other apostle, it was not a Christian assembly or seminary that instructed or approved Paul. It was Jesus himself who chose Paul, taught him, and gave him his marching orders. When men came to the church in Galatia claiming to have authority from Peter and the apostle James, Paul scoffed at their teaching because, although it had elements of the truth in it, it was not the pure unadulterated gospel. Paul had to expose their fraud. Like Thomas Merton said, heresy must be condemned because it usually has just enough of a hint of the truth in it to lead well-meaning Christians astray. And we allow ourselves to be led astray at the peril of our souls.

St. Paul had taught that Gentiles coming to faith in Christ did not have to become Jews first. Gentile Christians did not have to obey the old Jewish ceremonial laws. That Christians should follow the ethical dictates of God's law was a given. Who would say that a Christian is free to murder, lie, steal, commit adultery, or whatever? No one should. But Gentile Christians didn't have to keep kosher or be circumcised to be followers of Christ. That's what the false teachers were telling the Galatians and it was wrong. It was not a point of scholarly debate; it was not a matter on which Christians could faithfully hold a variety of opinions. It was wrong. At one point Paul was so angry that he confronted Peter face-to-face on this issue.

St. Paul had the ability to speak so boldly because he knew that he was answerable to Christ alone, and not to Peter, and not to James, or to any apostolic council. His call came from a special revelation of Jesus Christ to him personally; the gospel he preached came directly to him from Christ himself too. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, many of whom had walked with Christ when he was still on earth, were still living by the Jewish law. Maybe it was force of habit; or maybe it was not to offend new Jewish converts to Christianity; or maybe they just didn't know any better – they hadn't figured that part of Christianity out yet. Not everyone matures in Christ at the same time. Whatever way it was, although Paul had the highest love and respect for Peter, James, and the others, he knew he answered to a higher authority and he could not cave in to their perversion of the gospel. Paul had to be true to Christ, no matter how negative the earthly consequences of that might be for him. To not be faithful and true to Christ would be at the peril of his own soul.

St. Paul's situation, and his reaction to it, has implications for Christians living in the world today. Particularly I am thinking of our young people who graduating from school and going off to work or to more education. Something Mark Twain is supposed to have said applies to St. Paul and to us. He said, "Don't let your schooling get in the way of

your education.” Many of us have had the experience of finding that what we learned about a subject in school is very different from how that body of knowledge is applied in the real work environment. Sometimes the hierarchies and programs we create actually prohibit learning and just support the status quo. There comes a time when we have to go beyond what we were taught.

St. Paul had a direct revelation from Christ himself. We also have a direct revelation from Christ himself, it's His Word, the Bible, which not only *contains* but *is* the Word of God. Just as Paul could not be constrained by those without the benefit of his revelation, neither should we allow ourselves to be held down by those who will not acknowledge God's self-revelation and the radical lifestyle it demands. I'm normally a rule-follower, a person who appreciates the necessity of good order, but there are times when the inertia of the establishment has to be moved by an irresistible force, and that force is Christ. As Luther told us, popes and bishops and councils can be wrong. The gospel is not their property; they didn't create it. No one is infallible. The Bible is Jesus' bequest to us and we must follow it, not human teachings, regardless of what the "experts" say. We must follow God's will, not the will of human beings.

St. Paul did that. He trusted in Christ, not human flesh. He stood up for the gospel against what was popular, against what sounded wise, against the status quo. We too are called to take a stand for the Word of God, no matter how unpopular it might be. In the working world, and in academia, the Bible is neither well known nor well respected. People will be prejudiced against because you are a Christian. But you can stand fast for your Christian ideals and values, and you can be a witness for Christ as St Paul was, because Christ has revealed himself to you. Christ is beside you, his Spirit will guide you, and your very life can give him praise. Amen.