

“Paul, called to be an apostle, and set apart for the gospel of God” Rom 1:1
“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles” Acts 9:15

It would be very difficult to overestimate the importance of the personal call to ministry which Paul had directly from Jesus. It gave immense clarity and authority to his witness and enabled him to persist in his ministry against all the obstacles and difficulties that were placed in front of it. Those difficulties amounted to threats on his life, numerous imprisonments and every kind of deprivation. Paul said that at times he *“despaired of life”, “felt under the sentence of death”, and “under great pressure, far beyond my ability to endure”* but the sense of call could not be eradicated and he persisted in it right to the end of his life. This is why it was such a fundamental foundation of his spiritual life. It was the rock and strength of his apostleship. But for all of us an effective and persistent Christian life and witness always requires a sense of call of some sort even if not quite at the level of Paul's.

A Direct Call to ministry from Jesus Himself.

This call of Jesus on Paul's life came as part of the Damascus road encounter. The account of the event in Acts 22 indicates that Paul heard the first intimation of a call when, still prostrate on the floor and blinded by the light, he asked a second question of Jesus, *“What shall I do, Lord?”*, and received the reply, *“Get up, go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that you have been assigned to do”*. Whether more was said at that point about the nature of that work it is difficult to say, but, at the very least, Jesus was saying that he had something for Paul to do. It is probable that Paul's very question, *“What do you want me to do?”* indicates that he instinctively and immediately recognised that his extraordinary encounter with Jesus was for some specific and important purpose.

Whatever might have been said on that first day of his meeting with Jesus, there is no doubt that just three days later Paul heard fully about his assignment when Ananias was sent to him. The circumstances of Ananias's supernatural involvement were extraordinary and would have undoubtedly further endorsed for Paul the fact and reality of what had happened on the first day he met Jesus. Ananias came to Paul through nothing less than a vision of Jesus and a direct command. He was even told where Paul was and what he was doing (praying!). He was told that Paul was a *“chosen instrument to carry the name of Jesus to the Gentiles”* and that he was to suffer many things for the Name of Jesus. Thus Ananias, as the messenger of Jesus proclaimed to Paul, *“you will be his witness to all of what you have seen and heard”*. Paul himself, summing up this call later before King Agrippa (Acts 26:15-18) declared that Jesus had said to him, *“I will rescue you from your own people and the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place amongst those who are sanctified by faith in me”*. Thus Paul's call was direct from Jesus and personal; it was also clearly pointed toward the Gentiles.

This revelation of the living Jesus and the call on his life were later strengthened by further encounters with Jesus. In Acts 22:17-21 Paul relates how, whilst praying in the temple in Jerusalem, he fell into a trance and saw Jesus, who told him to leave Jerusalem immediately because the Jews would not receive his testimony. Likewise, when, many years later, he was witnessing in Corinth and came under very strong and threatening opposition from the Jews, Jesus spoke to him in a vision, *“Do not be afraid, ... keep on speaking ... For I am with you ... and I have many people in this city”* (Acts 18:9).

It is little wonder, then, that Paul had an enormous sense of the validity and importance of his ministry. It had been given directly to him by revelation. That was a simple fact. He was not boasting, nor did he have any inflated sense of his position. So when the Galatians were in danger of wandering away from the things that Paul had taught them, he wrote to them reminding them explicitly and forcefully, as well as accurately, that he was *“Paul, an apostle - sent not from men, nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead”*. (Gal 1:1). He also went on to tell them that what he had taught them was not of men but *“by revelation from Jesus Christ”*. In similar manner he sharply reminded the fractious Corinthians that he was, *“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God”*. (2 Cor. 1:1). His use of the term *“apostle”* to describe his calling was wholly accurate and appropriate simply because Jesus had *“sent”* him, which is exactly what constitutes an apostle (*“a sent one”*). It was for this reason that he could take his stand alongside Peter and the Lord's other apostles without any sense of inferiority; he had seen the Lord and he had been personally commissioned by him. He was *“set apart for the gospel of God”* as they were.

In this respect Paul follows the pattern of the chosen leaders of the Old Testament; his experience is completely at one with theirs. They were people for whom a revelation of God was key to their life, and they were people for whom the revelation brought a call to a task. Abraham's call to leave his kindred and set out for Canaan came direct from God. Moses' commission to lead a whole nation through the wilderness to the Promised Land was of such an order that anything less than a direct and personal call and a continual sustaining of that call would not have sufficed. The prophets, likewise, survived through the reality and the sheer clarity of their call. It is not the case, however, that a sense of call can only come to people of such standing - after all, Ananias, of whom we hear nothing more after his part in Paul's conversion, was himself in personal vital touch with Jesus. So were men like Timothy and Luke. They had a great sense of call to witness and to serve. So also, it would appear did the rank and file of the early church.

A gospel received by revelation direct from Jesus

Paul's call was essentially to speak out what he had seen and learned through the revelation that God had given him of Jesus; *“you will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard”* (Acts 22:15). The extraordinary fact is that those first three days of his new life with Jesus provided him with all the fundamentals of the gospel he was to proclaim. It was not that he sat down and read and learned such fundamentals. It was much more the case that they became incredibly clear to him

through what he had experienced first hand of Jesus. So what exactly did Paul receive by revelation; what truths did he become profoundly aware of that made up the message that belonged to his calling? We can tabulate the most important:-

1. The first thing Paul had learned by revelation was that Jesus was risen from the dead - the fundamental building block, the major truth to communicate. There was life after death, a resurrection for all who believed. But Paul had seen Jesus not simply as "risen", but also as "glorified" and "ascended". He had met him not simply as a fellow believer in heaven but as "the Lord", one to whom obedience and worship were due. He was Paul's master. The glory of the light that had shone about him was the glory of God. Paul wrote later of having seen "*the light of the the glory of God in the face of Christ*" (2Cor. 4:6). It is not surprising that in Ephesians and Colossians, as well as in other places, he had no difficulty in ascribing divinity and glory to Jesus (Eph 1:20ff; Col 1:15ff). Nor is it surprising that he was constantly preaching Jesus as Lord. He was simply preaching what he had seen. The experience most akin to this in the New Testament is perhaps the visionary experience which John relates in the book of Revelation. There, in highly symbolic form, John had a revelation of Jesus first as the Ancient of Days, full of glory in the midst of the church, and second as the Lamb in the midst of the throne, receiving all the acclamation of heaven (Rev. 1 and 5). John, like Paul, was told to speak of what he had seen and heard. Paul certainly wasted no time and immediately began to preach in the synagogues of Damascus that "*Jesus is the Son of God*" (Acts 9:20).

2. Paul learned a great truth by the manner in which Jesus saved him. He had been claimed by God at a point when he was the "*chief of sinners*", a persecutor. The revelation of Jesus had been a painful and traumatic moment, one which had left him blind and helpless, but it had also been a moment of great mercy and forgiveness. He knew he was not being accepted because of his pursuit of obedience to Jewish legal and religious requirements, for it was on account of those that he had been persecuting Jesus. He had been arrested by Jesus in an act of pure grace; all his efforts in the "law" had been of no avail. It was this act of pure grace that became indelibly printed on Paul's mind, and consequently his preaching was characteristically marked by the proclamation of the grace and forgiveness of God and the need of simple faith to receive it.

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3. In this connection it is also worth noting that the way Jesus apprehended him must have left him with a deep sense that it was all part of a sovereign choice of God. Paul recognised that God had marked him out and chosen him. Not that this gave rise to any hard or proud or bombastic sense of superiority, but rather, as with Jeremiah (Jer.1), a deep sense of humbling that this calling had been purposed in eternity before he was born. Certainly Paul gives expression in his letters to this realisation of being for-ordained to his ministry.

4. The meeting with a risen and glorified Jesus inevitably meant a new perception about the death of Jesus; it meant that it could only have been a purposeful death. Paul would scarcely have been ignorant of the way the Christians were demonstrating from the scriptures that the death of a Jesus was a sacrifice for sin, a pathway to forgiveness and a call to holiness. He now knew this was true, that he was accepted and called of God by virtue of what Jesus had done for him on the cross, and by nothing else. He knew that the power of the resurrection for him came on account of the forgiveness won on the cross, and that he could never proclaim the former without the latter.

5. The words of Jesus, "*Saul, why do you persecute me?*" revealed to Paul just how closely Jesus himself was bound up with the church, for it was really the believers he had been persecuting. He saw that Jesus was totally one with his people who believed in him; they were "in him" and he was "in them", they were his "body". The seed of much of his thinking on the church was sown, therefore, in that Damascus road encounter.

All these elements of truth, and more, which his revelation of Jesus burned into him were powerfully honed by what he heard from the other apostles, from the church and from the scriptures, but Paul insisted always that the essence of what he taught and preached came to him directly through his meeting with Jesus and not through others. His message was never in any sense second hand. This is something he makes very clear in his letter to the Galatians: "*I want you to know, brothers that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.*", and: "*when God, who ...called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man ...*" (Gal 1:11-12, 15-16). His own personal independent revelation of Jesus was the anchor of his gospel. It was this personal revelation that enabled him to stand even against Peter when occasion demanded (Gal. 2:11ff)

Paul is pilloried by a number of theologians, both Christian and Jewish, as the man who lost sight of the Jewish Jesus and who imposed upon the authentic base of Jesus as a Jewish rabbi a whole accretion of Gentile and Greek ideas such as dying and coming back to life, and incarnation. This sort of reconstruction is based full square on a rejection of Paul's revelatory experience. There is, however, no rationale for this refusal to believe Paul's testimony of his revelation of Jesus. The integrity of Paul's desire for truth and righteousness, so clearly evident throughout all his writings, simply does not fit in with any such imputation of lack of integrity in his testimony. Moreover, the idea of the centrality of revelation should not come as any surprise to any student of the Scriptures. If there is any one doctrine about our knowledge of God that the Old Testament makes clear it is that such knowledge is always a consequence of revelation. It is never a rational, philosophic process, nor is it a consensus of ideas from leaders whether intellectual, political or even religious.

A call to ministry such as Paul received from Jesus is not the experience of all, though it is the experience of many. But meeting with Jesus should leave in every believer at least a deep sense of call to live as Jesus lived and adopt the life style he commanded. For everyone there is a call to godliness and holiness of life. This is crucial, and in a world that has little time for the commandments of God and little "fear of God" it is of the utmost importance. The call is keep ourselves "unspotted from the world". This is much more than simply adopting a moral creed, or an ethic. It is an impelling conviction coming out of a knowledge that we have encountered the living, righteous God.