

It's finally happened. I've been bit by the "learning bug," and I have to do something about it. It's all Paul's fault...our reading for today and the research I've done so far about him inspires me to want to really know Paul and his life – to get to the bottom of the man who influenced early Christianity so much, to this day, his works are the source of comfort and controversy for Christians worldwide.

I just downloaded an audio lecture series on my laptop about his life and works, and I have a feeling you'll be hearing much more about him in the coming weeks. The influence and wisdom of Paul fascinates me – and I can't help but feel a connection to him for reasons I'll share with you in a few minutes.

From the little bit of study I've been able to do to date, I can tell you that Paul was an overachiever – once he realized how much God fit into his life, how much he needed God to be present in all he did, Paul seemed tireless and driven to get the Word out. He devoted his entire life to bringing more people – of any background or belief system - to know God – even if it meant he could be put to death for his work. Some of drive came from the fact that he may have felt he had something to prove – Paul may have felt he was working with a few shortcomings, compared to his contemporary in faith, Peter – but he was relentless, and as we'll see, unafraid to speak on his own behalf.

Paul was also a road warrior, and he traveled extensively throughout the lands that bordered the Aegean Sea, and in and around Rome and what is known as Turkey today – and some places he visited several times during his ministry! Paul constantly gathered new believers and created start-up churches – and he kept in touch with them after they got going, because they didn't always do what he recommended, which is why we have some of the books in the New Testament – he spent many hours writing long letters that scolded or encouraged the people in his new churches.

He wanted them to succeed...most of these churches were full of non-Jews who had heard about what Jesus did to help others and how he conquered death.

They were curious at first, and through his love, devotion and example, they later became steadfast partners in building the new Church. Paul seemed to have a formula that worked, and the success of the Early Church certainly influenced how Christianity has survived this long.

But for today, let's consider this letter to the Galatians, and zero in on what Paul's dealing with at this time in his life and the life of his Church...why would he write such a letter? What's going on here?

From "Working Preacher" an online resource put together by the Center for Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, contributing Professor of New Testament Studies Jaime Clark-Soles suggests this:

"Paul is in a bind in Galatia. He founded the churches in that area and then, as he was wont to do, moved on to preach the gospel elsewhere. But not long after he left some opponents arrived and cast doubt upon Paul's apostolic pedigree and proclamation. Often referred to as "Judaizers," these adversaries accused Paul of preaching "Christianity Lite" because Paul insisted that the Gentile Galatians did not have to become Jews to be Christian. That is, the males did not have to be circumcised and the Galatians did not have to keep kosher in order to attain the promises of the covenant. The Judaizers were insisting on circumcision, however. They further undermined Paul's message by questioning his authority."

Aha – there is war in the ranks. The new Galatian churches had been left to take root and grow on their own, but it seems that a faction of the Jewish population known as Judaizers had moved in to stir things up. They reminded the good people of Galatia that Paul wasn't part of the "original twelve" who traveled with Jesus, and, earlier in his life he was a devoted Pharisee himself, working against the very faith he now supported – so there was doubt about his being truly called by God to serve for and build the new church.

These Judaizers also accused Paul of watering down the new church by allowing members to come as they were, (as God made them) and not forcing them to follow Kosher eating habits and purification

rites...in other words, Paul didn't force them to become Jews first (in the traditional sense of the word).

Judaizers were in his turf and they were making trouble. So, this letter to the Galatians – leaving out the warm and fuzzy welcome and greeting usually included – gets right to the point of the issues. Paul has absolutely no doubt that he's been called to serve God, and he isn't about to let a group of trouble-makers mess up the work he's just done with this little band of churches in Galatia. He needs to bring them back to his side.

He reminds them – admits to them – that he indeed was an enemy of the church before he received God's call, and we can understand why the people of Galatia might doubt his sincerity if they knew about his past.

As a Pharisee, Paul practiced rigid adherence to the letter of Jewish Law, and it was his job to question and persecute these followers of Jesus! He probably had a cushy life as a high-level Jew, so he wasn't suffering in any way, and it's likely he was comfortable and content in his old life.

But that all changed in one dramatic moment...His is a story of literally, seeing the Light of Truth, dumping his old beliefs and accepting the call to serve. Remember, Paul was slammed by God on the Road to Damascus – blinded by an astounding light, and when by the Grace of God his sight returned, he didn't waste time seeking out teachers and rabbis to instruct him and help him understand his newfound role. Paul just hit the road and began doing God's work – his belief was so deeply embedded in his newly transformed heart, he couldn't wait to get started.

We speak of this as Paul's conversion, but Paul didn't refer to it that way, because he was already a Jew. He refers to his "call" or *kaleo*, in Greek. He still believed in the same God, consulted the same Scriptures and moral code as he did in Judaism. However, he did need to feel God's Call to this new twist in his faith, and once he received it, no one could stop him from heading out, armed with his new understanding of God's love and grace through Jesus.

Paul realized that if God could accept him as he was, God would accept anyone...and this was the backbone of his approach to bringing others to the new church.

All he had to do was share what he knew from his own background – teach the people about Jewish history and help them understand concepts like covenant, Messiah, Scripture and law, and let God take care of the rest.

So in converting the Galatians, Paul had invested months of time and instruction that was in danger of being lost because of the intrusion of the Judaizers; now Paul had to do some serious damage control and remind the people of Galatia that they were on the right team and that he was “called through grace” and therefore qualified to preach and teach.

He feels so strongly about convincing them, that he even says, “***In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!***”

This is powerful stuff, and it moves me. Paul was real – Paul was dedicated – and he was a fighter.

And while Paul was dynamic and driven, his first and most important role was as a God-loving pastor of the people. He rose up from the ranks, and set about his work without formal training – he just followed God’s cues. He struggled to defend his credibility throughout his whole career – and his past certainly didn’t help him – but it seems that those who truly heard his message were loyal supporters of his methods and hard-working members of his churches.

It’s a timeless story that repeats itself throughout his other books the New Testament and I believe it still has value for us today. In many ways, it is the story of your pastor and this congregation!

Paul said, “**I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.**”

Paul wasn't fooling himself – he knew who he was. But he turned his life around and believed God's Grace gave him the words and actions he needed to make a difference...he was tuned in to God's purpose in his life.

Like Paul, we – all of us - don't need credentials to do God's work – we just have to believe that the work we do is worthy - and of God.

And then, like Paul, we need to get to it – fearlessly, with love, and in honor of the One who saved us.

Amen.