

Was the Apostle Paul actually a false prophet?

The theory that the apostle Paul was a false prophet and not a true follower of Christ is usually put forth by those of the Hebrew roots movement persuasion, among others. They believe Christians should submit to the Old Testament Law, but Paul clearly disagrees with them, proclaiming that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic Law (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:23-25; Ephesians 2:15), but the Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), which is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and to love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). Rather than submitting to God’s Word, the Hebrew roots movement simply dismisses Paul altogether and claims that Paul was a false apostle and that his writings should not be in the Bible.

But Paul’s apostolic authority has been well documented in Scripture, beginning with his dramatic Damascus Road experience which changed him from a Christ-hating persecutor of Christians to the foremost spokesman for the faith. His astonishing change of heart is one of the clearest indications of his anointing by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Tom Tarrants, once labeled “the most dangerous man in Mississippi,” was one of the top men on the FBI’s most wanted list. Tarrants was a member of the Ku Klux Klan and despised African-Americans and Jews, a people he fully believed were God’s enemies and involved in a communist plot against America. Tarrants was responsible for bombing some 30 synagogues, churches, and homes. He was so dangerous that the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, sent a special team of FBI agents down into the American South to locate and apprehend Tarrants. They were successful and took Tarrants into custody after a violent shootout. Tarrants received a 30-year sentence in the Mississippi State Penitentiary.

While in prison, Tarrants one day asked for a Bible and began reading it. He got as far

as Matthew 16 and was confronted with Jesus' words: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" He couldn't escape the impact of Christ's statement and got down on his knees in his cell and asked God to deliver him from his sinful life.

Word of Tarrant's conversion soon began to spread throughout the prison and ultimately made it all the way back to Hoover, who strongly doubted the story. How could such a true change in such a hardened, evil person be validated?

About 2,000 years ago, another man had nearly the identical problem. When the apostle Paul first came to Jerusalem after his conversion to Christianity, he tried to associate with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him and didn't believe he was a true convert (Acts 9:26) because of his past persecution of Christians. Today, some people feel the same way about Paul. Occasionally, a charge is made that Paul was a Pharisee who tried to corrupt the teachings of Christ and that his writings should have no place in the Bible. This accusation can be put to rest by examining his conversion experience and his adherence to Christ and His teachings.

Paul's Persecution of Christianity

Paul first appears in Scripture as a witness to the martyrdom of Stephen: "When they had driven him [Stephen] out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58). "Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death" (Acts 8:1). The words "hearty agreement" indicate active approval, not just passive consent. Why would Paul agree with the murder of Stephen?

Paul the Pharisee would have immediately recognized the statement Stephen made right before his death: "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). Stephen's words repeat the claim Christ made at His trial before the high priest (Mark 14:62). Just as Jesus' claim resulted in Him being accused of blasphemy, so also these words would bring a murderous response from Saul the Pharisee toward Stephen.

In addition, the term "Son of Man" is filled with significance. It is the last time the term is used in the New Testament and it is the only time in the Gospels and Acts when it is not spoken by Jesus. It shows that Jesus is the Messiah, and it speaks of Christ's position in the end times as the coming King. It also combines two great Messianic passages: Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1. Daniel 7:13-14 emphasizes the universal aspect of Jesus' rule; that He is not simply a Jewish ruler, but also the Savior of the world. Psalm 110:1 presents the Messiah as being at God's right hand. Besides stressing power and position, it also shows acceptance.

All these things would have infuriated Saul the Pharisee, who at the time did not possess the true knowledge of Christ. But it would not be long before Saul the Pharisee would become Paul the evangelist for Christ.

The Conversion of Paul

In the three versions of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-9, 22:6-11, 26:9-20), there are repeated elements which appear to be central to his mission and commissioning. First, it marked his conversion to Christianity; second, it constituted his call to be a prophet; and third, it served as his commission to be an apostle. These three points may be broken down into the following, more intimate considerations: (1) Paul was specifically

chosen, set aside, and prepared by the Lord for the work that he would do; (2) Paul was sent as a witness to not just the Jews, but the Gentiles as well; (3) Paul's evangelistic mission would encounter rejection and require suffering; (4) Paul would bring light to people who were born into and currently lived in darkness; (5) Paul would preach repentance was required prior to a person's acceptance into the Christian faith; (6) Paul's witness would be grounded in space-time history and be based on his Damascus Road experience—what he had personally seen and heard in a real location that would be known to all who lived in Damascus.

Before Gamaliel's pupil came to a proper assessment of the ministry entrusted to him by God and the death of Jesus, a revolution had to take place in his life and thought. Paul would later say that he was “apprehended” by Jesus (Philippians 3:12) on the road to Damascus, a term that means to make something one's own or gain control of someone through pursuit. In Acts 9, we clearly see miracles on display in Paul's conversion, the point of which were to make clear that God is in control and directing all the events, so that Paul will undertake certain tasks God has in mind, something the former Saul would never have had any intention of doing.

Although there are many observations that can be made about Paul's Damascus Road conversion, there are two key items of interest. First is the fact that Paul's life would become centered on Christ after his experience. After his encounter with Jesus, Paul's understanding of the Messiah had been revolutionized, and it was not long before he is proclaiming, “He [Jesus] is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20).

Second, we note that in Paul's conversion there are no positive antecedents or precursory events that led him from being a zealous opponent to a fervent proponent of

Christ. One minute Paul had been an enemy of Jesus, and the next he had become a captive to the Christ he had once persecuted. Paul says, "By the grace of God, I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10), indicating he was transformed by God, became truly spiritual, and he was one whom Christ possessed and was now a Christ-bearer himself.

After the Damascus experience, Paul first went to Arabia, but whether he actually began his missionary work there is unknown. What is more likely is that he earnestly desired a time of quiet recollection. Then after a short stay in Jerusalem, he worked as a missionary in Syria and Cilicia (that is for the most part in Antioch on the Orontes and in his native city of Tarsus) and after that in company with Barnabas in Cyprus, in Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia.

The Love of Paul

Paul, the former cold aggressor and legalist, had now become a person who could write of the key attribute that witnessed above everything else in 1 Corinthians 13 - love for God and those around him. The one who was supremely educated in knowledge had come to the point of saying that knowledge devoid of love only makes one arrogant, but love edifies (1 Corinthians 8:1).

The book of Acts and Paul's letters testify to a tenderness that had come over the apostle for both the unbelieving world and those inside the Church. As to the latter, in his farewell address to the Ephesian believers in Acts 20, he tells them that "night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears" (Acts 20:31). He tells the Galatian believers they are his "little children" (Galatians 4:19). He reminds the Corinthians that whenever they experience pain, he is wounded as well (2 Corinthians 11:29). He speaks of believers in Philippi as "having them in his heart"

(Philippians 1:7). He tells the Thessalonian church that he “abounds” in love for them (1 Thessalonians 3:12) and demonstrated that fact by living among them and helping build up a Christian community (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1-2). Repeatedly throughout his writings, Paul reminds his believing readers of his care and love for them.

Paul’s attitude toward unbelievers is one of caring and deep concern as well, with perhaps the clearest example of this being his articulation in the letter to the Romans of the sorrow he felt for his fellow Israelites who had not come to faith in Christ: “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:1-3).

This type of angst exhibited by Paul for unbelievers was also not restricted to his own nationality, but extended to non-Jews as well. As just one example, when he entered Athens, the text in Acts 17:16 makes clear that Paul was both repulsed and “greatly distressed” over the idolatrous situation the city was in. Yet he deeply cared about God’s rightful place as well as the people who were involved in false worship, and he immediately went about trying to engage the pagan unbelievers in discourse about the gospel which had been entrusted to him (Acts 17:17-34). And at the heart of his message was Jesus.

Paul on Jesus

Some try to argue that the picture Paul paints of Jesus in his Epistles does not match the Christ portrayed in the Gospels. Such a position could not be further from the truth. In fact, two of the Gospels (Mark and Luke) were written by men who were close

associates of Paul's, if not actual students of his (see 2 Timothy 4:11). It's hard to imagine that those books would contain a theology different from Paul's. Also, from Paul's letters, we learn the following of Jesus:

- He had Jewish ancestry
- He was of Davidic descent
- He was born of a virgin
- He lived under the law
- He had brothers
- He had 12 disciples
- He had a brother named James
- He lived in poverty
- He was humble and meek
- He was abused by the Romans
- He was deity
- He taught on the subject of marriage
- He said to love one's neighbor
- He spoke of His second coming
- He instituted the Lord's Supper
- He lived a sinless life
- He died on the cross
- The Jews put Him to death
- He was buried
- He was resurrected
- He is now seated at right hand of God

Beyond these facts is Paul's testimony that he left everything to follow Christ (the true test of a disciple as outlined by Jesus in Luke 14:26-33). Paul writes, "But whatever things [his Jewish background and benefits that he had just listed] were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:7-11).

Paul's Enemies

Paul's teachings and proclamation of Jesus were not popular. If the success of an evangelistic mission were to be measured by the amount of opposition, his mission would be regarded as a catastrophic failure. This would be in keeping with Christ's statement made to Ananias: "For I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16). The book of Acts alone chronicles more than 20 different episodes of rejection and opposition to Paul's message of salvation. We should also take seriously the litany of opposition and rejection that Paul lays out in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27. In truth, such hostility and dismissal is to be expected, given his audience. A crucified deliverer was to the Greeks an absurd contradiction in terms, just as to Jews a crucified Messiah was a piece of scandalous blasphemy.

Paul's enemies comprised a trinity. First, there were the spiritual enemies indicated in his writings that he was acutely aware of (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 2:18). Next, there were

his already mentioned initial target audience of both Jews and Gentiles, many of whom would mistreat and dismiss him. Lastly came the one that, it could be argued, perhaps caused him the most grief—the early Church itself.

The fact that Paul was seen as strange and questionable, not merely by fellow Jews but also by a number of fellow Jewish Christians, was no doubt hurtful to him. It would be one thing for Paul's authority and authenticity to be challenged outside the Body of Christ, but inside was a different foe with which he had to wrestle. First Corinthians 9:1-3 is an example: Paul insists to the Church that he was commissioned by Christ (others include Romans 1:5; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1). Some even believe that 2 Corinthians 11:26 suggests that there was a plot to murder Paul; a plot formed by other Christians.

Such combined opposition—lost humanity, spiritual adversaries, and distrusting brethren—certainly must have caused the apostle to despair at times, with evidence in his writings that he carried out his missionary work with the prospect of martyrdom before his eyes (Philippians 2:17), which ultimately turned out to be true. Paul was beheaded, tradition asserts, under the persecution of Nero near the third milestone on the Ostian Way. Constantine built a small basilica in Paul's honor by AD 324, which was discovered in 1835 during excavations preceding the erection of the present basilica. On one of the floors was found the inscription PAVLO APOSTOLO MART - "To Paul, apostle and martyr".

Concluding Thoughts About Paul

So was Paul for real? The evidence from history and from his own writings declares that he was. Paul's 180 degree turnaround from his Pharisaic life is not disputed by any

learned scholar of history, both secular and Christian. The only question is: what caused his about-face? What would cause a very learned Jewish Pharisee to suddenly embrace the very movement he violently opposed and be so committed to it that he would die a martyr's death?

The answer is contained within Paul's writings and the book of Acts. In Galatians Paul summarizes his story in this way:

"For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, 'He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.' And they were glorifying God because of me" (Galatians 1:13-24).

Paul's very life testifies to the truthfulness of what happened to him. In that respect, he was very much like Tom Tarrants. A dramatically changed life is hard to argue with.

And what finally happened to Tom Tarrants? J. Edgar Hoover wouldn't believe that Tarrants had actually become a Christian so he sent an FBI agent into the prison disguised as an inmate whose job it was to befriend Tarrants and find out the truth. About a week later, that FBI agent became a Christian and reported back to Hoover that Tarrants indeed was no longer the man he used to be.

A number of people petitioned that Tarrants be released, and eight years into his sentence, Tarrants was paroled and left prison. He went to seminary, earned a doctorate of ministry degree, and went on to serve as president of the C. S. Lewis Institute for 12 years. Currently, he serves as the Institute's director of ministry.

"You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16) and the fruits of the apostle Paul leave no doubt that he was very real indeed.