

PAUL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

16 ⁶ They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸ so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

ACTS OF APOSTLES 16: 6-10

... The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. The vision of Saint Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" (cf. *Acts* 16:6-10) - this vision can be interpreted as a "distillation" of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry.

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Benedict XVI's lecture seems to more than imply the divine destiny of Paul's journey to Greece and the encounter with Greek philosophy. Our concern is with Paul as he is found in the New Testament. Such a consideration is not as simple as it might seem.

Note the Pope quotes the Acts of Apostles as the source for Paul's mission to Macedonia. The circumstances occasioning this mission are unique to Luke's account as found in the Acts. It is safe to conclude that Luke is interpreting here. Of course, Luke's understanding of Paul's motivation might be quite different than Paul's understanding. All of us interpret according to our perspectives, convictions and experiences. What of Paul's own interpretation of such visionary experiences as found in Acts of Apostles 16: 9? In fact, Luke recounts five such visions of which Acts 16: 9 is the first (see 18: 9-10, 22: 21, 27: 23-24).

Nowhere in Paul's own writings do we find the Lucan perspective. Paul writes of his visionary experiences in somewhat similar but distinctive terms. Luke presents Paul as a prophet continuous with the out-pouring of God's Spirit found in the Hebrew Scriptural tradition:

²⁸ Then afterward

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves,

in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

JOEL 2: 28-29

This is in keeping with the "theological history" of Luke by which the Spirit of God inspires the growth of the community of Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome (that is, to "the ends of the earth"). The visions of Paul, as found in the Acts of the Apostles, are motivated by the missionary designs of the Spirit of God (see in particular Acts of Apostles 16: 6 and 7 where the Spirit re-directs the mission of Paul). There is a similar but distinct motivation in Paul's writings. Paul, in conformity with Luke, is the Apostle to the Gentiles. The mission to the Gentiles is affirmed and empowered by the visionary experiences of Paul.

Luke is quite concerned to present Paul as a legitimate disciple of Jesus as well as a true Apostle like the Twelve. The Lucan perspective is not necessarily the perspective of Paul. Consider Paul's own testimony:

1 ¹¹ For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹² for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being. ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; ¹⁹ but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, ²² and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; ²³ they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

GALATIANS 1:11 - 2:10

Paul's self-understanding of his "conversion" experience stands in contrast to Luke's rendition. Paul describes his experience in an intense and personal manner. Paul comes to realize what would be his destiny. The mission to the Gentiles is not simply a preaching to a people who are not Jewish. The mission to the Gentiles realizes the universal nature of the God of the Hebrew Scripture. Luke sees the journey to Rome as the fulfillment of God's plan to bring the Gospel of Jesus to all peoples. Paul recognizes in this Jesus the universal solidarity of God with all people. This very Jewish Jesus is both Messiah for the Jews and Savior for humanity.

Paul differs from Luke on the issue of his authority. The "authority" to proclaim this universal message of God's solidarity is from God and not human agency. Paul speaks of his own experience in mystical rather than institution terms. As such, Paul stands with the Biblical tradition as it was understood and influenced in his time.

⁶ And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) —those leaders contributed nothing to me.

GALATIANS 2: 6

The issue here is not one of institutional legitimacy or legalism. Paul does not seem to object to leadership as such. Rather, the concern is whether or not that leadership recognizes the Gospel of Jesus as the gift and grace of God for all peoples. For Paul, this Gospel of Jesus is not a matter of human consensus or institutional agreement. The Gospel is a matter of radical freedom by which individual people realize their salvation is from God as free gift of God's grace. The "legitimate" leadership must not re-invent laws of particularity by which salvation is envisioned as belonging to the few in opposition to the many. Paul realizes the harmful tendency of humans to exclude others. He who sought to exclude others through killing now includes them through

love. Paul finds the Spirit of Jesus in his own experience of Jesus – a rather mystical experience.