

Introduction:

Einstein's theory of relativity – things we thought were unalterable absolutes are more flexible than we had imagined. Time is not the constant we thought it was, but varies with speed. In our pluralistic society, this principle of physics has been applied to morals and truth – truth is no longer absolute – I am not bound by your truth – I find a different truth – a different worldview – a different reality more intellectually satisfying. Don't force your convictions on me – I have the right to my opinion. Paul's truth claim is being undermined, and he doesn't just sit back and say 'well, I have my truth and you have your and that's nice' – no, he realizes there is absolute truth that has been revealed to him and there are eternal consequences. He stands to defend it passionately – and he starts by looking at the historical data.

Paul is defending his apostolic authority, and making it clear that his gospel is not man's gospel; he didn't receive it from any man; he wasn't taught it. The legalist party that was preaching a different gospel – a gospel of lawkeeping – which is not good news at all – would say that Paul received his commission to preach from the original apostles who were in Jerusalem. His authority and his message were derived from them, and since (as they would claim) he had deviated from that message, he has no authority. To combat this undermining of his ministry, Paul tells his Galatian converts the truth - he relays his history – highlighting his independence from the Jerusalem apostles, as well as his unity with them.

Read Galatians 1:15-24

God had set Saul apart before he was born to reveal Christ Jesus in him and preach Christ through him to the gentiles. God had given him his authority as an apostle, and God had given him his message. It was clear from the direction of his life that he was at the top of the 'top ten list' of most unlikely people to ever become a Christian; let alone become a Christian leader. And after God knocked him off his proud horse and humbled him and revealed Himself to him, Paul didn't run off to bible school to understand what his new calling was all about. He didn't run to Peter, James and John to get a proper understanding of his newfound faith. That's appropriate for us to do, because we receive the message second hand.

2Timothy 2:2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

We have the apostolic doctrine laid out in the writings of the New Testament, and we can study them there. Paul is claiming for himself something entirely different here – he is claiming to be an independent eye-witness of Jesus Christ. He is claiming to have been personally commissioned by the risen Lord. So instead of heading to Jerusalem to check in with those who had been apostles before him, he headed to the mission field and started preaching. Luke gives us some of the history of this period:

Acts 9: 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 ¶ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying,

12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem.

14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."

15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized;

19 and taking food, he was strengthened.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.

20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”

Paul didn’t waste any time – he immediately started preaching the Jesus he had been persecuting. And his radical transformation didn’t go unnoticed:

Acts 9:21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?”

22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

At this point he tells us in Galatians that he spent some time in the Nabataean desert. I have often pictured Paul vacationing at some secluded oasis, studying some parchments and spending his days in solitude, in prayer and meditation, processing his revelation and contemplating his newfound faith under the Arabian palms. But the text doesn’t say that, and the implication is actually the opposite – he didn’t get saved and spend the first few days preaching Christ and then go on a three year sabbatical in the desert twiddling his thumbs. That’s not Paul’s style, and it’s not what stirs people up to want to kill you.

Acts 9:23 ¶ When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him,

24 but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him,

25 but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Paul had done something during this period of time to incite the Jews of the area to try to kill him. This typically doesn’t happen when you go on vacation in solitude. It happens when you open your mouth and proclaim Jesus as Lord! Paul gives us another little tidbit on this story in his letter to Corinth:

II Corinthians 11:32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,

33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Josephus tells us that Aretas was king of Arabia -from 9BC to 40AD. Apparently during his stay in Arabia he had stirred things up among the Jews enough that they had persuaded the king that he was a troublemaker and should be arrested.

When God called Saul, He told him:

Acts 26:16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,

17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you

18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul didn’t waste any time. He immediately and incessantly began to discharge his God-appointed duty of opening blind eyes with the good news.

Paul's point here is that he had absolute independence from anybody who could have given him a primer on the gospel. He received the message directly from God, and then he went off and actively preached it, stirring up controversy wherever he went.

v18-20 Paul's visit to Cephas and James after three years

It was three years before he met any apostle or even returned to Jerusalem. And when he did, it was a brief visit with Cephas (Aramaic name of Peter).

- 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.
19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.
20 (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)

It says he went to 'visit' Peter. The word translated 'visit' actually indicates that he went to interview, to investigate, to examine Peter. Paul didn't go there to receive training or authorization from Peter – he went to get to know Peter – to have Christian fellowship with Peter – he went as a peer and not as a student. Paul wants to be thorough and not leave out anything that his readers could call into question, so he mentions that on that visit he also talked to James, a half-brother of Jesus, who became a leader in the Jerusalem church. This might seem incredible to the Galatians, that he went to Jerusalem and didn't meet all the other apostles, so he swears an oath to the truth of it. Fifteen days would have been hardly enough time to receive training in preaching the good news from Peter – and that was not the purpose of his visit.

v21-24 Paul unknown to Judean Christians except in reputation

From Luke's record in Acts, it seems that even in Jerusalem, Paul was not locked up in a room with the Apostle Peter having private discussions for fifteen days.

- Acts 9:26** And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.
27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.
28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord.
29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.
30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Luke tells us that he tried to join up with the disciples but they were afraid of him. Barnabas had to introduce him and give credibility to his conversion. As was his style, Paul didn't sit idly around shooting the breeze with Peter and James. He went in and out and preached boldly in the name of Jesus –he stirred things up so much there that they tried to kill him, so the Christians had to send him on his way for his own safety. They shipped him off to Tarsus – his hometown, which was the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia from 72 A.D.

- 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.
22 And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.
23 They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."
24 And they glorified God because of me.

Apparently, between his conversations with Peter and James and his preaching among the unsaved, he didn't make the acquaintance of the churches in this area. He would have been there only two Sundays, and he spent that time reaching out to the lost rather than hanging out with the saved.

Conclusion

Paul tells the Christians of Galatia that the false teachers have sold them a bill of goods. Truth matters. Their undermining of Paul's authority as an apostle and the credibility of his gospel simply didn't fit the facts of the case – so Paul lays out the real sequence of events – from his miraculous conversion on – to demonstrate that he simply did not have the opportunity to receive his gospel or his authority from any man. He was an independent witness of Jesus Christ, and yet he was not a loose cannon – he made a visit to become personally acquainted with Peter. And far from confronting him because his message was compromised, he says the churches were 'glorifying God' because of him. They identified him as preaching the same faith that he so recently had tried to snuff out – not his own brand or altered version of it, but the very same faith. And they didn't glorify Paul – they glorified God