

LEADERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

BY LINDA OWEN

The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters give us a glimpse of some of the early Christian heroes and heroines who dedicated their lives to spreading the gospel.

Paul

Paul was the outstanding missionary of the early church. He lived on the borderline between two worlds, which made him the perfect missionary for Christ. Paul was of pure Jewish descent, from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5); but he was also a citizen of the Greek city of Tarsus (Acts 22:3) and a citizen of Rome (22:25). At that time relatively few Jews enjoyed such privileges of citizenship. Paul's father, it would seem, was wealthy enough to purchase citizenship status.

Growing up in a Jewish family meant that Paul was trained in the Jewish Scriptures and tradition (Acts 26:4-5). Like every Jewish boy, Paul learned a trade; in his case, it was tent making (18:3). At home his parents probably spoke the current dialect of Aramaic, but he would have learned the ancient Hebrew language from the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul also spoke the Greek language used by the greater community, and he acquired an understanding of the Greek culture. Later, Paul's knowledge made it possible for him to quote Greek philosophers and poets (17:16-31), thus establishing rapport with his Gentile listeners.

At the proper age (about thirteen years) Paul went to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, the most honored teacher of the first century (Acts 22:3). Paul became a Pharisee like his father (23:6), dedicated to the outward observance of the Mosaic law as the one sure guide to God's will (Romans 2:17-20). He regarded the church's claims about a crucified Messiah as blasphemy and the gospel as a "scandal."

This zealous commitment to the Jewish laws and traditions was the motivation for Paul's persecution of those who believed Jesus was the Messiah. The first Christian martyr was Stephen, who was stoned because he placed Jesus superior to the law and the

Temple (Acts 6:13-14). Paul approved of his death, believing Stephen opposed the very foundations of Jewish belief (8:1). No doubt Paul was something more than a mere spectator at the execution, for his zealous persecution of the church followed Stephen's death.

Known far and wide as an ardent inquisitor and persecutor, Paul caused havoc in the church (Acts 8:3) as he sought to destroy the Christian sect. After Paul encountered Christ on the Damascus Road, however, he confessed Jesus as Lord, confessed his sin, and was baptized (Acts 9:1-9, 17-19; 22:6-21; 26:12-23). In his conversion experience, Paul believed "the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:5, 14). He then began proclaiming Jesus with the same vigor with which he had once opposed the followers of Jesus.

At first, believers were understandably suspicious of the man known for his frenzied persecution of Christians. In time, Paul won over the disciples and worked successfully in ministry with Barnabas. Paul's divine call to carry the gospel to the Gentile world was recognized by the leaders of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:7-9).

Paul's first missionary trip (in A.D. 46-48) began from Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas had been preaching to Hellenistic Christians (Acts 13-14). Commissioned by the Antioch church (13:1-3), they took the gospel to Cyprus and Galatia (13:4-14:28). In spite of opposition and peril, their efforts produced results in each city (13:44, 52; 14:1-4, 20-28). Before moving on, Paul and Barnabas organized church leadership in each locality (14:23).

When the numerous conversions caused a Jewish-Gentile controversy over circumcision, Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to confront the problem before it divided the church. The apostles and church leaders ruled that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish before becoming Christians (Acts 15:1-29).

After a time, Barnabas and Paul separated, [See "Barnabas" below.]. Paul and Silas set out for Syria and Cilicia in order to strengthen the churches where Paul had preached before (Acts 15:36-41). On what was Paul's second missionary journey (in A.D. 49-52), they (assisted by Timothy) visited Macedonia and Achaia. They established churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Corinth, and Ephesus (Acts 16:1-18:21).

Paul's third missionary venture (in A.D. 52-57)

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