

ST. PAUL NO “SAINT”

For centuries church people have been calling him “Saint” Paul. But a good guess is that there must have been a lot of church people in his own day who would not have been so complimentary.

In fact, if you read between the lines you get the impression that the apostle Paul was something of a renegade who all but thumbed his nose at the church’s leading citizens.

You can catch a few strong hints of this in the first couple chapters of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Right off the bat you get the impression that the man was furious.

And rightly so. For the very people whom he had served seemed to be turning on him,. As he saw it, they were twisting his message beyond recognition.

Here’s what apparently had happened: After Paul left the territories of Galatia (the central highlands of modern day Turkey), he was replaced by some other Christian missionaries.

These otherwise unnamed preachers may have had connections with the mother church at Jerusalem. In any event, the effect of their work was to demean the importance of Paul in the eyes of his Galatian converts.

How Paul got wind of this we don’t know. But in order to correct the situation he fired off his angriest letter. His strategy was to demonstrate that he was an independent apostle.

No one could question his credentials, least of all some functionaries connected with the headquarters in Jerusalem.

So he spent about a fourth of his letter giving his pedigree. He insisted that he didn’t get his message from any human agency; it came straight from God (Galatians 1:11-12).

He made a point of not consulting with anyone, least of all with the apostles at Jerusalem, after he became aware of his mission. Instead he retreated to the “Arabian” territories east of the Dead Sea and then back-tracked to Damascus (1:15-17).

After three years he finally made it to Jerusalem, but only for a two-week stay. And he only saw two of the leaders there, Peter and James, before he set off for the mission fields (1:18-24).

It wasn’t until 14 years later that he made another trip to Jerusalem. By then his reputation as an apostle to non-Jewish people was so well established that the leaders—James, Peter and John in particular—could only give him a pat on the back for a job well done (2:1-10).

In fact, if there was any question about his independent credentials, the time he stared down Peter should have put an end to the doubt (2:11-14).

The long and short of it was that Paul wasn’t anybody’s patsy. He knew what he had to do and didn’t give a diddly-damn for anyone who tried to get in his way.

You can imagine how well that would have gone over with other Christian leaders. Paul must have looked to them like an unauthorized upstart.

While they may have appreciated his conversion to the cause and his enthusiastic defense of the faith, he must have seemed obnoxiously unconventional.

When all was said and done, however, Paul’s career was the only one which was remembered with any clarity by the early Christian community. Probably because he had a hand in creating such a large share of it!

Although at the time he may have been highly unpopular in official circles, history has awarded him the title “saint” and a reputation as the early church’s premier missionary.

Readers who persist in treating the biblical writings as overly holy and super-pious may be doing themselves a disfavor. When you put them in clear focus you can see some of the orneriness which makes them so realistic.

And therefore interesting.

In the case of “Saint” Paul, you can appreciate what a feat it was for him to be awarded the title. For a man who started out by tweaking the nose of the established church, he ended up with its highest accolade.

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