

CHAPTER XI

THE PROOF'S OF HIS MINISTRY

Paul was a stranger who came out of nowhere, so to speak, and established himself as an apostle of Christ solely on the basis of trances and visions to which there are no witnesses. He previously had no association with the fellowship of disciples of Jesus, and indeed was a persecutor of the Way. Suddenly, in consequence of his apocalypse on the Damascus Road, everything changed. But I must remind you yet again that there were no testifying witnesses, and we have only his word for what had transpired inside his person. When he went forth to the nations to preach, some seventeen (Or fourteen) years later, he carried no letters of recommendation as did other apostles, and may even have been actively opposed by them, for his gospel was a different gospel, his Jesus another Jesus, his spirit another spirit. My reading of his character does not preclude an earnestness and sincere conviction concerning his calling. If he had not been so thoroughly convinced within himself, how could he have persevered through much opposition and suffering to preach his gospel to the Gentiles, and how could he have been so persuasive to so many people?

Still, had I been in his position, I must inevitably have been called on to confirm my calling, within myself and to my disciples. Did he not sometimes say to himself, sore from a beating and stoning, ill and imprisoned, "Am I after all mistaken?" Did he never have doubts when, after many long years, the Lord, whose return he had taught others would be soon, had nevertheless not appeared? That he persevered and continued to press on confirms that there were things in his experience that proved, to his satisfaction, that he was not deceived and that it was Jesus and not Satan who spoke to him on the way to Damascus. What were those things?

We do not have to look hard to find them, for he repeatedly points to certain experiences in his ministry as seals, guarantees or proofs of his ministry. Most of them are summarized in one verse, I Corinthians 9:1, 2:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Here are listed four proofs in the form of questions that beg positive answers. His sense of freedom, of liberation, from the oppressive burden and bondage of the Mosaic Law gave him much assurance. How could his ministry not be genuine when it was involved in the proclamation of a faith that had done so much for him? Once he was in agony, crying out within himself, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of Death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24,25)! Now the spirit of thanksgiving overflowed within him as he experienced the liberation of his soul. This was real! It is no wonder he was assured by this freedom.

Next, there was what was to him his incontrovertible commission as Apostle to the Gentiles, given by Christ himself, and this was another seal of his ministry in the Lord. This worked together with the third proof, his vision of the risen Lord, leaving him with the conviction that he was the last to see the resurrected Messiah and to hear a voice from his mouth. It was this voice that sent him to the Gentiles and, somehow, tied him to the prophecy of Isaiah, that he should be a light to the

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Gentiles, and assured him that God had called from his mother's womb to carry the message forth to the world.

There was a man, a very devout man, bound and driven by forces within him to serve God by purging the ranks of Jews of any taint of heresy, including that of those who followed the man called Jesus, of Nazareth. It was on the Damascus road, in pursuit of the People of the Way, that it all finally came to a climax. Was it the unbearable pressures building in his psyche that exploded, sending him into a severe attack of hysteria that blinded his eyes and left him helpless? Was it a thunderstorm from which lightning suddenly shattered the ground in the midst of Paul and his companions and that had the effect of causing him to feel that it was meant especially for him? Was it the Lord Jesus himself speaking to him from heaven and saying, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting? (Acts 9:5). Was it some combination of these?

We can never know, but of one thing we can be certain: for Paul it was real, genuine, and the end of one life and the beginning of another. It was the climactic event that led to the profound conviction, expressed in the words, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live" (Gal. 2:20). This was the new man who, as he related in II Corinthians 12, fourteen years earlier was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body he did not know, but he did know that this man was caught up into Paradise – whether in the body or out of the body he did not know, and who heard things that man cannot utter. He was so very elated by the abundance of revelations that a thorn in the flesh was given him to harass him and suppress his elation.

It is doubtful that this was the Damascus Road experience, for the chronology of "fourteen years" is difficult to relate to that event. This must therefore have been yet another astonishing revelation that came to him sometime during the years in Cilicia that intervened between Damascus and the beginning of his work as an Apostle. It was another one of the "revelations" that set him free from bondage to the law and bound him to his vision of the heavenly Christ. There, in Cilicia, the revelations continued and his faith finally assumed the final form, in which he was the man chosen by God to carry the message of salvation to the world as expressed in Isaiah 49.

Then, finally, comes the fourth seal of his ministry – his converts in all the churches that he founded throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. "You," he said to the Corinthians, "are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord." Everywhere he went he found people who believed and who cleaved to the Lord as preached by him. This was the icing on the cake! Think how you would be confirmed if, having received a message from the Lord, having seen the Lord and been given a commission as apostle to the Gentiles, and having learned from him through an abundance of revelations a most wonderful and liberating message that was confirmed in the ancient prophets of your people, you found everywhere men and women lining up to believe and to place their trust in the Lord and in your apostleship?

Other "apostles" appeared bearing letters of recommendation from the Mother Church, but Paul proudly pointed to the disciples at Corinth and said, "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation!" (II Corinthians 3:2)

But on this cake even the icing has icing. Not only did disciples appear everywhere, but also a special gift was given to all, the gift of the Spirit, which became another seal of his apostleship:

But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee (II Corinthians 1:21,22).

This "*arrabon*," this down payment, like earnest money, is proof that the calling is genuine and that it will be fulfilled in the divine glory according to the eternal promise. And so, everywhere Paul's churches arose, there arose these manifestations of the spirit, this certain feeling, this ecstasy, this prophesying, this speaking in tongues, and though Paul saw that it was a guarantee

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that could be abused, he nevertheless rejoiced that "I speak in tongues more than you all." He rejoiced that whether he was in his right mind, or whether he was "beside himself," it was for the Lord.

And yet there is more, for there were the signs and wonders to further seal the validity of his ministry:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works (II Corinthians 12:12).

We do not know what signs and wonders Paul performed at Corinth, but they were most probably the same as those Luke speaks of as having been performed later at Ephesus: And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and evil spirits came out of them (Acts 19:11).

We should not be surprised that so much assurance and so many infallible proofs have fueled the spiritual experience of much of the West for many centuries and even now continues to work its wonders. It is not for me to pass the final judgment on such a man or on the work he so mightily and heroically pursued against all odds. But I know this from the depths of my heart, knowledge with assurance no less strong than that of Paul as he spoke of the many seals of his ministry: he did not preach the Gospel that Jesus preached.

This is a grave and serious statement, and one I must hasten to support. What was the gospel of Paul, and how did it differ from that of Jesus? Toward an answer to these questions we turn now to present a brief summary of the gospel of Paul, as I have already developed the gospel of Jesus in Book I. The treatment of Paul's gospel can be brief because it is already understood throughout Christendom, although there are variations of interpretation. Jesus' gospel, on the other hand, is almost unknown in Christendom and its presentation has required much more consideration. This has been done prior to making a comparison of the two gospels, which addresses the question of how Paul's gospel differs from that of Jesus. You will then see more clearly why I classify Paul as a stranger to Jesus and his chosen apostles, and why I cannot but identify him with the "stranger" of John 10:5.