

## ***The Jesus Movement Part V: Paul and his opponents.***

‘The plain truth is that we find this man a perfect pest...’ (Acts 24: 5)

*In this final New Testament article in the Mutations series, some of the most intense conflicts between Paul and his opponents in the Jesus Movement will be examined. All of them in some way bear uncanny resemblance to the dynamics of current passionate arguments, conversations and disputes involving dysfunction and disunity in the modern Catholic Church. The conflict between Paul and his opponents touch upon and encompass inept leadership, partisanship, fraudulent behaviour, deception and monumental abuses of power. The Pauline narrative also documents attempts by some Christian groups to manipulate, coerce and control the freedom and consciences of fellow believers. As an Apostle of Christ, Paul desired, more than anything else, to assist his converts to grow to full maturity in Christ. Anything that caused his people to regress into spiritual and psychological infancy represented a defeat for the Gospel.*

### *Paul’s Mission within the Jesus Movement*

During the years of his apostolic mission Paul was forced to deal with many different kinds of issues which threatened the integrity and survival of the communities he had evangelised. Some of these issues involved Paul’s teaching as well as the leadership and liturgical structures he set in place. He had often to contend with people who exhibited behaviours and attitudes which compromised the Gospel and jeopardised his own apostolic ministry.

Paul’s volatile personality often had the effect of polarising opinion. His fierce intolerance of anything he regarded as an obstacle to the Gospel frequently created enemies. At the outset of his ministry, Paul arrived at a number of fundamental convictions, two of which were non-negotiable. These related to Christ as the central meaning of everything in creation and the integrity of his own divine calling to be Christ’s apostle.

The preceding articles in this New Testament section of the *Mutations* series have documented the extraordinary pace of change and development experienced by the *Jesus Movement* as it found itself gradually estranged from its Jewish roots and as it set out independently into the uncharted territory of the Gentile mission. The sheer courage, faith, energy and ability to look outwardly and adapt required of the early Jesus Movement were staggering. During the first fifty or so years of its existence the rate of change and evolution in their faith understanding and group identity probably bears little comparison in the history of Christianity. The theological and pastoral ground work for this great transition was largely

accomplished by the Apostle Paul. It is understandable then that Paul was the real founder of Christianity.

As the Jesus Movement distanced itself from Judaism, it needed to resolve the tensions which existed between two sources of divine revelation, the Torah and Christ. To be precise, in the history of Salvation, God had revealed the Torah, along with its underlying ethnic separation and purity laws, as the sure and certain guide to right Covenant relationship. However, the appearance of the Jesus Movement marked a dramatic discontinuity with the Jewish teaching about the old Covenant relationship. The disciples of Jesus arrived at the conclusion that the Mosaic Law had been definitively superseded by Jesus Christ and the universal significance of his message.

### ***Paul: the attack from within.***

It was noted in the July article that Paul's most dangerous opponents were not the leaders of Judaism or the Roman authorities but his fellow missionaries. In the Acts of the Apostles, written a couple of decades after Paul's death, one group is called "the circumcision party." (11: 2; 15: 1) Paul, in more moderate terms, referred to them as 'certain men from James.' (Gal 2: 12) In other places he was less polite.

An occupational hazard faced by Paul was the proliferation of different interpretations of the *Kerygma* (the core proclamation of the Gospel) preached by many different wandering charismatic missionaries. Some of these itinerants exerted some degree of influence, good or bad, on communities founded by Paul or on other churches for which Paul became a significant and valued mentor. An unfortunate and disastrous outcome of this melange of discordant apostolic influences was division and resultant contending loyalty groups. The extent and toleration of partisanship in the Corinthian community caused immense problems for Paul.

Four main factions split that already troubled community: *I am for Paul, I am for Apollos, I am for Cephas, or I am for Christ.* (1 Cor 1: 12) *Is Christ divided?* Paul asked. (1 Cor 1: 13) In Paul's view, party factionalism represented an enormous threat to the credibility, stability and ultimately to the survival of the Jesus Movement. Successful attraction of outsiders depended on the intrinsic appeal, inner coherence, congruence and unity of the Christian community. The Corinthian Christians were failing on almost all counts.

### ***Paul's defends his legitimacy as an apostle.***

Paul's main antagonists were intent on discrediting his credentials as an apostle. He was not one of the original Twelve, so he was forced constantly to defend himself against those who challenged him. Some of their attacks on Paul involved *ad hominem* swipes whereby his ministry was maligned and he was personally belittled and denigrated. One of the cruellest of these was the mocking allusion to his obvious speech disability:

“He was not sent, he claims, to preach the gospel ‘with eloquent words of wisdom’ (1 Cor 1: 17). He asserts ‘my speech and my proclamation were not in the persuasive words of wisdom’ (1 Cor 2: 4), and concedes that ‘I am unskilled in speaking’ (2 Cor 11: 6). Paul’s own self-assessment was confirmed by the Corinthians who said, ‘his speech is beneath contempt’ (2 Cor 10: 10.” (1)

In order to authenticate his apostolic credentials Paul actually invoked a creedal formula from the Apostolic Tradition to support his insistence that he was a witness to the Resurrection of Christ. It was on this basis that he could rightfully claim the right to be called an apostle along with Peter, James and the others (1 Cor 15: 3-5). In a gesture of self-mockery, he even went on to say, “Last of all, as to one untimely born (*ektroma*, an ‘abortion’!), he appeared also to me.” (15: 8) Then, despite the admission of his former life as a persecutor of the disciples, he vigorously affirms his place among the apostles. (15: 10-11)

Paul mockingly describes some of the more vexatious of his opponents, the *Super Apostles* (2 Cor 11: 5). He resorted to some of the most powerful language in all of his correspondence to strip away the pretence and dissemblance of these people: “And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor 12-13) and elsewhere he labels them “false brothers” (Gal 2: 4).

In a typical rush of blood, Paul introduced into his defence the full weight of his Jewish heritage along with the record of his total self-investment in the Gospel: He invited his opponents to do better than that:

“But whatever any one dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ...” (11: 21b-23; See the catalogue of his sufferings for the Gospel in 2 Cor 11: 21-29).

During the on-going conflict with his opponents Paul was forced to defend himself once again with a powerful rhetorical *tour de force*:

“If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil 3: 4-6)

### ***The Judaizers***

Of all those who opposed Paul and subverted his mission, it was the Judaizers who caused him the most grief. These were the people who taught that Gentile converts, in order to be incorporated fully in to the new economy of Salvation, should be required to accept not only Baptism but also the Jewish dietary and separation laws. Very early on in his ministry Paul

had evangelised communities in Galatia, Macedonia and Archaia but he had not attempted to impose Jewish laws upon his converts and this policy was later adopted in the Council of Jerusalem in 51 CE. It was the hypocrisy of sectional interests in the Jerusalem community who reneged on that agreement which stunned and outraged Paul. He had no tolerance for hubris and bad faith. Some of Paul's opponent infiltrated the community at Antioch which had originally commissioned Paul to go to the Gentiles. Not only did they cause disruption and confusion among the disciples at Antioch, they also manipulated Peter into scandalously regressive behaviour:

“But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles (non Kosher); but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely (Gk: *hypocritically*), so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity (Gk: *hypocrisy*). But when I saw that they were not being straightforward about the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to like Jews?’” (Gal 2: 11-14; 11-21)

For Paul, this dramatic display of duplicity and regression on a fundamental and agreed policy on Gentile conversion led Paul into being “resolutely and radically antinomian.” (2)

Paul feared that the Judaizers would seduce his new converts away from their new found freedom by coaxing them into the childish compliance with regulations and compulsiveness driven by fear of punishment. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul used a powerful social metaphor to illustrate the temporary role and authority of the Torah. He pointed out to his struggling converts that the Torah functioned just like the educated person (*paidagogos*), often a slave, whom a wealthy family retained to educate, supervise and even discipline the male heir of the household until he reached adulthood. When the heir received his independence he was given the *toga virilis* which was the traditional Roman garment symbolising the transition of a child to adulthood and independence. Once that ritual was concluded, the role of the *paidagogos* was complete.

Paul showed the more aggressive Judaizers no quarter and his spectacular displays of anger show it all: “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit and glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3: 2-3). For the members of the *circumcision party* who caused dissention and regression in the Galatian community Paul wished them more of the same discomfort they caused others, “I wish those who unsettle you will mutilate (*apokopsontai*, ‘will dismember’) themselves (Galatians 5: 12)

In one of the most uncompromising passages in all of his letters, Paul unmask the hubris of his opponents, their manipulation and self-interested attempts to impose Jewish ritual purity laws on the Galatian community,

“It is those who want to make a good showing but from inauthentic motives that would compel you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross

of Christ. For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh. But far be it from me to glory in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor un-circumcision counts for anything, but a new creation.” (Gal 6: 12-15)

### ***Authentic Freedom: Maturity and Adult Conscience.***

“For freedom Christ has set us free; do not therefore submit again to the yoke of slavery”  
(Gal 5: 1)

Paul constantly appealed to his converts to embrace Christ as their model of humanity, freedom and maturity. He taught them that their moral choices should be made without compulsion, scrupulosity or imposition of any kind. Maturity in Christ, he insisted, demands acceptance of personal responsibility and not supine compliance.

Paul’s understanding of authentic freedom is clearly illustrated in the famous “meat offered to idols” episode in Corinth (1 Cor 8 - 10). The case involved persons who felt free in conscience to eat meat which had been offered in worship of the gods but there were others in the community whose scruples and poorly informed consciences restricted them. While Paul cautioned “the men of knowledge” to be considerate of the latter, he expressed impatience with the harping behaviour of the scrupulous and their moral underdevelopment.

A slogan of the first group, “the men of knowledge,” which they bandied around in the community was the boastful, “All things are lawful.” Paul’s response, “but not all things are helpful.” He repeats their slogan, “All things are lawful” but this time responds with the rebuke, ‘but not all things build up’ (to edify, hence edifice, edification, Gk *oikodomein*: 1 Cor 8: 1) For Paul, altruisms and mutual deference was essential element among the members of the Jesus Movement, “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of the neighbour.” (1 Cor 10: 23-24) A perfect illustration of this is his passionate appeal to the wealthy Philemon to welcome back Onesimus, his runaway slave who sought sanctuary with Paul: “Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you --....” (Philemon 8-9) and again, “.....but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be out of *compulsion* but of you own *free will*.” (14; See also 2 Cor 8: 8; 9: 5-7)

What Paul says to Philemon and earlier on to the Corinthians provided Thomas Aquinas with the biblical foundations for his teaching on conscience In his commentary on 2 Corinthians 3: 17-18 Aquinas wrote:

“Whoever acts of his own accord acts freely, but one who is impelled by another is not free. He who avoids evil, not because it is evil, but because a precept of the Lord forbids it, is not free. On the other hand, he who avoids evil because it is evil is free.” (4)

Aquinas elaborated:

“Every judgment of conscience is obligatory, be it right or wrong, be it about things evil in themselves or morally indifferent, in such wise that he who acts against his conscience always does moral evil.” -- III *Quodlibet*, 27 His discussion on whether one is bound to do what an erring conscience calls for in the *Summa Theologica* I-II, q 19, art 5 is rather involved, but, finally, the answer is in the affirmative: every conscience binds, even one which is objectively erring.

Fr Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) was a theological expert or *peritus* in 1967 during Vatican II. In his *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (his Council Diaries) Ratzinger wrote a section on Conscience following the debate on Religious Freedom. It reflects the moral position of Thomas Aquinas and the standard doctrine of the Catholic Church:

“Over the pope as expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there stands one’s own conscience which must be obeyed before all else, even if necessary against the requirements of ecclesiastic authority. This emphasis on the individual, whose conscience confronts him with a supreme and ultimate tribunal, and one which is the last resort, is beyond the claims of external social groups, even the official church, and also establishes a principle in opposition to totalitarianism.”

Paul’s attitude towards compliance with law and blind obedience to it is important to understand as it provided an important theological foundation for Aquinas’ teaching on the development of *virtue*. A habit is transformed into a virtue only when there is a free acceptance of the intrinsic value of that which is commanded.

### ***Some thoughts by way of a Conclusion:***

From very early on in his ministry, Paul became very conscious of how much damage can be inflicted on the human psyche by the irrational compulsive attitude of blind obedience to law and compliance with regulations especially when these are proposed as certain pathways to right relationship with God consequent salvation. Millions of Catholics are still coming out of the psychological and spiritual fog caused by that culture.

Paul’s personal experience and correspondence can provide an outstanding insight into the phenomenon of religious movements and structures which operate on the principles of power and control over people’s lives. As an Apostle of Christ, Paul desired, more than anything else, to assist his converts to grow to full maturity in Christ. Anything that caused his people to regress into spiritual and psychological infancy represented a defeat for the Gospel.

One of the challenges facing the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has is to acknowledge the reality that, since the invention of the printing press, the overwhelming majority of Europeans and people of the New World have become literate. People can read; they know what is going on. Even back in pre-revolutionary France, up to around 90% of the urban population could read. The numbers in rural areas was also very high as well. Literacy provided the common people with the ability to test the realities around them in ways they had never before

imagined.. This had profound implications for the hierarch's very bad habit of treating the women and men entrusted to them as infants.

## Endnotes

- 1) J. Murphy-O'Connor (1996), *Paul – A Critical Life*, (Oxford, OUP), 50.
- 2) Murphy-O'Connor (2012), *Keys to Galatians: Collected Essays* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 73). *Antinomian* means to be opposed to unmitigated legalism. The authentic purpose of the rule of law is not disputed. "Paul (alone) had the perspicacity to see that the *coexistence* of the Law and the Messiah had made them deadly rivals. Jews did not need two saviours. They were either saved through the Law or they were saved by the Messiah. Those who opted for Jesus the Messiah in fact rejected the Law. Equally, those who were committed to the Law had to reject the identification of Jesus as the Messiah." Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, (2008), *Paul. His Story*, (Oxford, OUP), 18.
- 3) "Whoever acts of his own accord acts freely, but one who is impelled by another is not free. He who avoids evil, not because it is evil, but because of a precept of the Lord forbids it, is not free. On the other hand, he who avoids evil because it is evil is free. .... So, we are said to be free, not because we submit to the divine law, but because we are prompted by our good habit..." – Supp 2 Cor. 3:17, N. 112.
- 4) *An excursus on Conscience*, beginning with three explanations of it within the perspective of the Catholic Tradition.

Two Catholic theologians, Joseph Ratzinger and the late Brian Lewis, articulate the standard, authoritative Catholic doctrinal position while the third, Cardinal George Pell expresses a distorted, stunted view of Conscience which is deviant from Catholic teaching. Pell believes, probably still, that there is no room in Catholicism for private conscience because he will not accept the possibility of an individual arriving in good conscience and grace as an informed decision which is at variance from Catholic teaching.

George Pell, "The Inconvenient Conscience," *First Things*, May 2005 (Linked [here](#)); Brian Lewis, "Freedom of Conscience," *Compass Theology Review*, Autumn, 2007 (Linked [HERE](#)); Ian Elmer, "Primacy of Conscience," *Catholica Forum*, 2007 (Linked [HERE](#)); See the one site synoptic view for the Lewis, Ratzinger and Pell positions (Linked [HERE](#))

George Cardinal Pell takes the apologetics approach to the question of Conscience, its formation and function. He cherry picks his way through Newman's *Grammar of Assent*, is dismissive of Lewis, a professional Moral Theologian and never refers to Thomas Aquinas. After trotting out his doctrinal pantomime horse, Pell proceeds to shoot it:

"Much of the debate over conscience in Catholic circles focuses on the possibility of a conscience against the Church's teaching. This seems to me a peculiar notion. For a start, it would mean that dissenters believed that following the Church on, for

example, contraception or same-sex relationships, would actually give them a guilty conscience, not just frustrated wishes. Yet it seems clear that most dissenters do not fear guilt if they obey the Church: What they fear is precisely the frustration of their unsatisfied wishes.”..... “a false notion of conscience has helped to carry many away from Catholic practice and indeed from Catholic faith. If there are two opposing versions of conscience, and there are, this is the obverse side to Newman's claim that true conscience helps us to recognize the One True God.

A debased notion of conscience, a barely concealed enthusiasm for autonomy disguised as an appeal to the primacy of conscience, weakens our sense of obligation, damages our purity of heart, and makes it harder and harder to see God.”

See the statement of concern about Pell’s ideas on conscience expressed by prominent Australian Catholics. ([Here](#)) Several of the signatories later formed the advocacy group *Catholics for Ministry*.

Pell articulates a position which down plays individual conscience its moral integrity by setting up rhetorical straw-men of ego-centrism, selfishness and then proceeding to burn them down. He also is very clear that the Catholic notion of conscience is bound up with obedience to the Church’s teaching and prescriptive law. When he mentions *Humanae Vitae* and declares it uncontested teaching, he shoots himself in the foot because he fails to deal with the fact that around +90% of the Catholic adult population have rejected HV as being both infallible or as having binding moral force on them. The *sensus fidelium* has spoken decisively and all Pell and the official spokespersons for the *Magisterium* can say is that the people are invincible ignorant and /they have not been properly catechised (indoctrinated).

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