

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (6-8-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Saul and the Church

Acts 9:23-31

Additional Bible Reading: Romans 1:9-16

Introduction

Saul's conversion led to association with the people of God, the Church. Christian life has both individual and social aspects. The individual relationship with Christ is the beginning of it all, then the social relationship with other Christians. Vertical and horizontal side. "The Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion" (John Wesley).

Acts 9 tells us of Saul's conversion, leading to sight restored, baptism, and immediately he associated with the believers in Damascus for some days. Later on, following escape from Damascus in a basket let down over the wall, Saul went to Jerusalem and at once tried to join the church in Jerusalem.

We are going to look at three aspects of the early church – its membership, character and progress.

Membership of the church

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple (Acts 9:26). Thanks to Barnabas, Saul was finally allowed to join them, and he became one of them. Joining the disciples, κολλασθαι, means giving himself, cleaving to them, joining together, binding himself, attaching himself closely. Same word is used to describe a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife (Matthew 19:5; Ephesians 5:31). The closest possible human relationship. Also used in Acts 8:29, to describe Philip going and joining the eunuch's chariot.

So Saul was anxious to enter as closely as he could to Christian fellowship. This is perfectly natural. He was a changed man. He belonged to the Lord and so he wanted to join His people. Members of the same family want to belong together and meet together. So also in the Christian family. When we belong to God as our Father, through Christ, we want to know and enjoy the company of the rest of the family. Necessary for full Christian development. **Have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ** (Ephesians 3:18). Necessary for Church so that its fellowship is enriched and witness is more effective.

Saul had all the qualifications for membership:

- (a) Converted man. And he had gone on to confess his conversion publicly in baptism – the badge ordained by Christ for disciples. Door to entrance into the visible church. Here is vital and most essential qualification for membership. Cannot join Christ's people before we are first joined to Christ. Cannot call Christians our brothers and sisters before we know Him and His Father. There must be repentance and faith. Then salvation must be followed by joining

God's people. **And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved** (Acts 2:47). He did not save them without adding them to the church. He did not add them to the church without saving them. No solitary Christianity and no nominal Christianity. Salvation and church membership belong together.

- (b) Essentials of Christian belief. Saul did not know all he was one day going to know. Unlikely at this stage he could have written the Epistle to the Romans or the other great epistles. But he knew the basic truths – which every church member should know. **He began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God... proving that Jesus is the Christ** (Acts 9:20,22). Saul knew the ministry of the Holy Spirit because he was filled with Him. He knew the life-changing grace of God. Church membership is not for great theologians only. But people need to be clear and sure about essentials of Gospel and great truths about salvation and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- (c) Prepared to serve the Lord. Saul was in the synagogues preaching Christ. Later he was confounding the Jews in Damascus, and speaking boldly in the name of the Lord in Jerusalem. He was anxious to do something for the Lord. The Son of God had loved him and given Himself for him, and so he wanted to do something in return. No person who understands his need and Christ's work of atonement can simply fold his arms and be content to be a passenger.

*“Saviour, Thy dying love
Thou gavest me,
Nor should I aught withhold
My Lord, from Thee.
In love my soul would bow,
My heart fulfil its vow,
Some offering bring Thee now,
Something for Thee.”*

- (d) Devotional life. Saul was found praying when Ananias visited him. This is one of the great signs of the new birth. When we are saved we long to have a real and personal communication with the Lord. You are as likely to find a living man without breathe, as find a Christian without prayer. “Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native air” (James Montgomery). Regular devotional life is a mark of a true church member.

Saul wanted to join the disciples and had all the marks of what it means to be associated with church. The church is not full of perfect people or great theologians or earth-shattering preachers. But everyone in it should be converted, have a grasp of the elements of doctrine, be prepared to serve the Lord, and have a devotional life.

Character of the church

What sort of church did Saul join? We have two glimpses in this chapter of Christians in the early church – Ananias in Damascus, and Barnabas in Jerusalem. Both were characterized by brotherliness. Ananias was naturally suspicious at first. It is not wrong to be careful and cautious. It is very silly to be gullible and naïve. **Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God** (1 John 4:1). But the moment the Lord assured him, Ananias did not hesitate to go to Saul. He

is truly described as one of the forgotten heroes of the early church. His first words to Saul on entering the house and putting his hands on him, were “Brother Saul”. Never mind the past, that was forgiven and forgotten. There was no recrimination or blame. “Brother Saul” is the greeting Ananias gave to the former murderer and enemy and persecutor.

This is what Christ does for men. Whatever the past, that is put behind, and He makes them all brothers. This is why the Gospel is the only real hope – it is the only power to make the bitterest enemies brothers at the deepest level.

Saul faced more suspicion at Jerusalem, but this time Barnabas took him *επιλαβομενος*. The word for taking him firmly by the hand (Acts 9:27) is the same word to describe how Jesus took hold of the man with dropsy (Luke 14:4), and when Jesus caught hold of Peter as he started to sink (Matthew 14:31). A powerful firm grip.

Barnabas assured the disciples of Saul’s testimony, and the proof in his preaching. Saul was in Christ, and they must not hold his past against him. His mistakes of the past did not damn him. The Lord had not rejected him, so why should they? Barnabas proved himself to be the Son of Consolation – or encouragement – by being Saul’s sponsor. Barnabas’s explanation led to brotherliness being shown by all. Saul joined the church, and they protected him whenever there were plots to kill him.

If churches were full of men and women like Ananias and Barnabas, there would much more warm-heartedness, generous treatment, forgiveness of the past, hospitality and kindness. All would be brought into the circle and none left with loneliness and problems. All would feel wanted and loved.

C.H.Spurgeon, at 16, entered a Baptist church in Cambridge. It was one of the most respectable, generous and intelligent of churches. But no one spoke to him. He was sat at the Table with one other man in the pew. After the service Spurgeon spoke to the man, “I hope you are quite well sir”. The man replied, “You have advantage of me.” “I don’t think so for you and I are brothers.” “Oh? I don’t know what you mean.” “When I took bread and wine just now, in token of our being one in Christ, I meant it. Did you not?” The man put his hands on Spurgeon’s shoulders and said, “Oh sweet simplicity. You are quite right my dear brother. Come to tea with me. I am afraid I would never have spoken to you if you had not spoken to me first.” Spurgeon went to tea every Sunday. In time, the man used to walk with Spurgeon to village churches when he began to preach. He remained a true friend. They often laughed over the incident when “I dared to assume that Christian fellowship was a reality.”

Progress of the church

With Saul’s persecution at an end and with his joining and strengthening the church, it had rest and peace. But this did not lead to a time of decline and slowing down as so often happens. But it led to growth, upward and outward. The church was edified and built up. It grew in spiritual life and vigour. Christian character was developed. They went on with the Lord.

Acts makes much of this side of the church. Paul to the Ephesian elders shows it is through the word of His grace that people are built up. They walked in fear of the Lord. Not terrorized or cowering before the Lord, but deep respect for God and reverence for Him. He was almighty God, and they were anxious not to displease Him or offend Him. Fear of the Lord makes us careful.

They also knew the comfort, help and encouragement of the Holy Spirit. The “Helper” indwelt them, taught them, convicted them and led them into truth, glorifying Christ. This led to growth in numbers. These churches multiplied because the Holy Spirit was working and they were under His authority. They attracted sinners, and brought them to Christ.

How some of our churches need to change before they can be effective. Many things need to be removed, and new things brought in. There needs to be spiritual growth within, godly fear and reverence and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. If these things are absent or hindered, we look in vain for real growth.

What do these things say to us as individuals and as a church?