

# Sketches of Faith

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AN INTRODUCTION TO CHARACTERS  
FROM CHRISTIAN HISTORY

*Edited by John D. Woodbridge*

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# Paul

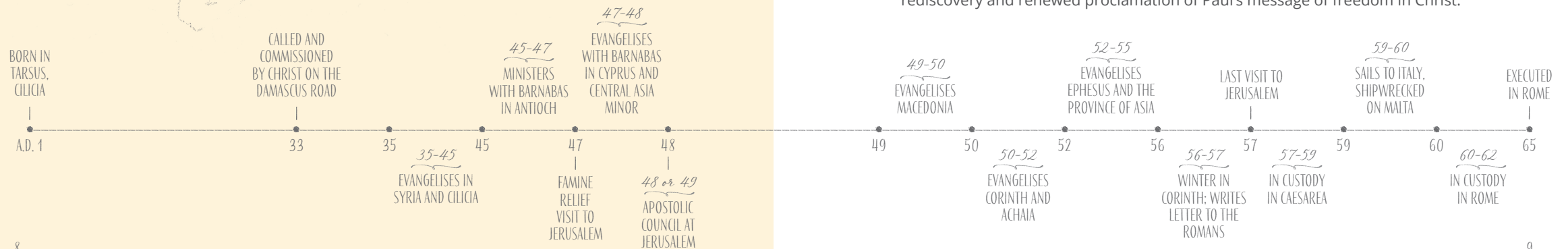
## AND THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE

F. F. BRUCE

Paul, who is called Paul occupies a unique place at the threshold of the church's history. He was not the first person to preach the gospel; he was not even the first to preach it to Gentiles; but once he was called and commissioned, he 'worked harder than all of them' (1 Cor. 15:10). In less than thirty years, he established a Christian presence along the main roads and in the chief cities from Antioch to Rome. To him above all, under God, is due the firm rooting of Christianity in the Gentile world.

In addition to his activity as gospel preacher and church builder, Paul must be recognised as the church's first great theologian. His letters were not written as essays in systematic theology; they addressed themselves to urgent situations in the life of the churches. But they contain a wealth of teaching about the profoundest implications of the gospel; the being and purpose of God, the person and work of Christ, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the way to get right with God, the basis of Christian ethics, the hope of the people of God, and the destiny of the created universe. His exposition of these themes is unsurpassed and permanent in its relevance.

Above all, Paul is the great champion of Christian freedom. He was aware of the propensity of many Christians to submit to spiritual guidance so absolute that it becomes spiritual dictatorship. He steadfastly set his face against legalism in any form, urging his converts to stand firm in the liberty with which Christ had set them free. Repeatedly, great liberation movements in the life of the church have been due to the rediscovery and renewed proclamation of Paul's message of freedom in Christ.



## THE EARLY EXPANSION OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity was from the first a missionary enterprise; otherwise it would not have lasted more than a generation. In the spring of A.D. 30, its founder was publicly executed and his followers dispersed. His cause, it seemed, had collapsed; it was impossible, by all natural reckoning, that it could ever survive the scandal of the cross. No one, surely, would accept a crucified man as teacher, leader or saviour.

Yet the impossible happened. Not more than twenty years after his death, the proclamation of his message caused commotion in the Jewish communities of Alexandria, Thessalonica and Rome. Moreover, his way of life was being accepted by Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. Thirty years after his death, Christianity had been firmly established in the provinces of Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia; and in Rome itself his Gentile followers outnumbered those born Jewish.

'THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENED  
BECAUSE JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD'



The impossible happened because Jesus, the crucified one, rose from the dead on the third day, appeared to his disciples, filled them with new hope and power and recommissioned them to be his witnesses. Nor was it only to his former disciples that he appeared in resurrection. He appeared to one man in particular – Saul of Tarsus – with such compelling grace that he transformed him

on the spot from a fierce persecutor of Jesus' followers into the most devoted champion of the faith that he had tried to exterminate.

## PAUL'S LIFE AND WORK

Saul was his Jewish name; he is better known by his Roman name, Paul. He was born to a threefold inheritance.

By ancestry he was a Jew; by inclination and training he was dedicated to the maintenance and propagation of the religious traditions of his nation, an upholder of the sacred law of Israel, a member of the party of the Pharisees.

By environment he was a Hellenist. Tarsus, his place of birth, was a centre of Greek culture, 'no ordinary city', as he called it himself (Acts 21:39). Yet he was not educated in Tarsus, but

'PAUL WAS EDUCATED IN JERUSALEM, WITH  
THE MOST EMINENT RABBI OF HIS DAY'



in Jerusalem, at the school of Gamaliel, the most eminent rabbi of his day. Nevertheless, he was familiar with the Greek way of life, and spoke and wrote Greek fluently.

Third, he was a Roman citizen. By the time of Paul's birth, Roman power was securely established in western Asia. He was born in the Roman province of Cilicia, as a Roman citizen. Roman citizenship was a privilege sparingly bestowed on provincials; Paul's father or grandfather must have rendered some notable service to the Roman cause to be honoured in this way. Once Roman citizenship had been granted to a man, his family inherited it.

'PAUL'S RICH HERITAGE WAS BROUGHT  
INTO THE CAPTIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST'



This rich heritage was, to use one of Paul's characteristic expressions, brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. The obedience of Christ meant for Paul that – from the moment Christ called him on the Damascus road to be his apostle to the Gentiles – this was his purpose in life: 'but one thing I do' (Phil. 3:13). He knew himself to be conscripted into the service of Christ; yet never was there such a willing conscript.

## PAUL AND JERUSALEM

As compared with the apostles before him, those who had been Jesus' companions during his earthly ministry, Paul was odd man out. No one could challenge the validity of *their* commission; but Paul's credentials were repeatedly challenged. He claimed to have been commissioned by the risen Christ, but he could not substantiate his claim by an appeal to witnesses. How, then, did he substantiate it? By the energy with which he worked for Christ; by the number of churches he planted; better still, by the quality of his converts' lives. He knew that his own ministry would be judged by the character of his converts – not only by his fellow-Christians but by the Lord himself on the day of final review. When he was called upon to render an account of his apostolic stewardship, Paul would be content if he could point to his converts, his 'joy and crown' (Phil. 4:1), and invite the Lord to assess his work by what he found in them.

Although Paul did not lack detractors, even within the Christian fellowship, the leaders of the Jerusalem church acknowledged that he had been called to evangelise his fellow Jews. Paul carefully maintained his independence of the Jerusalem authorities; he was responsible to Christ alone. Yet he was equally careful to discharge his ministry in fellowship with Jerusalem.

'HE WAS RESPONSIBLE TO CHRIST ALONE'



## PAUL'S APOSTOLIC CAREER

About three years after his conversion, Paul returned to Cilicia (administratively united at that time with the neighbouring province of Syria) to preach the gospel there. In the early 40s, he accepted an invitation from Barnabas to join him in caring for the young church of Antioch, and directing its evangelistic activity. Later, the church of Antioch released him and Barnabas to undertake missionary outreach in Cyprus and Asia Minor. At that time were founded the churches of Galatia to which, not long afterwards, the letter to the Galatians was sent.

About A.D. 50, after the Council of Jerusalem, he parted company with Barnabas and moved west, evangelising the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, the main parts of modern Greece. There he preached the gospel and planted churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth and elsewhere. He was prevented from staying long in any of the Macedonian cities, but the churches planted during his brief visits were

among the most stable and encouraging in his whole mission field.

In Corinth, the chief city of Achaia, he spent eighteen months. During that period, Christianity was firmly planted in Corinth and in other parts of Achaia. While he was in Corinth, Gallio, a member of an influential Roman family, arrived as proconsul of Achaia. Since his proconsulship can be dated quite precisely to A.D. 51–52, this gives us a fixed date in the chronology of Paul's career. An attempt was made to prosecute Paul before Gallio for propagating an illegal religion. Gallio decided that, whatever Paul was preaching, it was some variety of the Jews' religion, which was protected by Roman law, and he had no desire to adjudicate between rival interpretations of Judaism. Gallio's ruling was, in fact, helpful; it meant Paul's preaching did not contravene Roman law, provided it caused no breach of public order.

## EVANGELISATION OF ASIA

Paul's next base was across the Aegean, in Ephesus, where he spent nearly three years. This was one of the most fruitful phases of his apostleship. Thanks to his witness, and that of his colleagues, the whole province of Asia was thoroughly evangelised, and remained for centuries a principal bastion of Christianity in the Mediterranean world. During those years, too, the necessity of dealing with continuous problems among

'THE WHOLE PROVINCE OF ASIA  
WAS THOROUGHLY EVANGELISED'



his converts in Corinth taught him what was involved in the care of all the churches.

Paul organised among his Gentile churches a special collection in aid of the church in Jerusalem. This was not only a charitable gesture; Paul intended it to create a bond of closer unity between the Jewish Christians of the mother church and the Gentile Christians of his mission field. When he took the proceeds of this collection to Jerusalem, accompanied by delegates from the contributing churches, he hoped sufficient evidence would be provided of God's approval of his apostleship.

When this responsibility had been discharged, he planned to leave the eastern Mediterranean and evangelise Spain, visiting Rome on the way. To prepare the Roman Christians for his visit, he sent them a letter just before he set out for Jerusalem. In this letter he presented the Roman church – a church he had never seen – with a statement of the gospel as he understood and proclaimed it; he evidently had a clear picture in his mind of the important part that the Roman church could play in the furtherance of this gospel in the world.

## PRISONER OF ROME

His plan did not work out as he had hoped. In Jerusalem he was taken into protective custody by the Roman authorities, and transferred to Caesarea for his greater safety. The Jewish leaders charged him with violating the sanctity of the temple and being a disturber of public order. After several appearances before Felix, procurator of Judea, and his successor, Festus, he

exercised the privilege of a Roman citizen by appealing to have his case referred to the judgment of the emperor in Rome. There, he was confident, he could expect a more impartial hearing than was possible in Judea; moreover, in this way he made sure of getting to Rome.

'IN ROME, HE SPENT TWO  
YEARS UNDER HOUSE ARREST'



In Rome, he spent two years under house arrest, waiting for his appeal to be heard. His presence there brought great encouragement to Christians in the capital. The gospel became a talking point in the praetorian guard and in the imperial civil service, and the Christians in Rome eagerly exploited this interest to bear more energetic witness. Paul reckoned that, whether the emperor's verdict was favourable or not, the progress of the gospel was promoted by his coming to Rome.

Because the narrative of Acts ends before Paul's appeal is heard, we can't be sure of its outcome. Nor can we be sure if, in the event of his being acquitted, he realised his plan to evangelise Spain. But the effect of his missionary activity was lasting, and in his letters he bequeathed to posterity a treasure beyond price.

## PAUL'S MISSIONARY ADDRESSES

Two outstanding missionary addresses are ascribed to Paul in Acts. One was delivered in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia to a congregation addressed as 'Men of Israel,

and [you] who worship God' (Acts 13:16). 'You who worship God' are Gentiles who had joined the Jewish congregation in worship. They could all be credited with some knowledge of the Old Testament. So Paul reminded them of the history of Israel from Moses to David, and then told how the promises made to David regarding a descendant of his have been realised in Jesus. Jesus, put to death by his enemies, had been raised up by the power of God; through him salvation was assured to all believers.

The other address was delivered in Athens, where Paul was invited to expound his teaching before the court of the Areopagus. The members of this court were pagans – highly cultured pagans, but nevertheless pagans. Paul began his exposition not by referring to Hebrew history – of which they knew nothing – but by mentioning an altar dedication he had seen in the city 'To the unknown God'. You acknowledge that he is unknown, said Paul; I have come to make him known. So he spoke of God in creation, providence and judgment, concluding with the announcement that the man through whom God's judgment will be administered has already been marked out for this role by his resurrection from the dead. Few were impressed by Paul's argument. The Athenians were too sophisticated to believe anyone could be raised from the dead.

'PAUL WAS THE MOST VERSATILE OF MEN'



Paul was the most versatile of men, in his missionary tactics as in other ways. His

basic message remained the same – ‘Jesus, crucified and risen, is the Son of God’ – but his presentation of it varied with the audience. He knew the importance of establishing an initial point of contact with his hearers, not presupposing a knowledge they did not possess. ‘I have become all things to all people’, he said, ‘so that by all possible means I might save some’ (1 Cor. 9:22).

## PAUL’S MISSIONARY POLICY

Paul was a pioneer missionary. His policy was to preach the gospel where it had never been heard before. His time was limited; there was no point in duplicating the efforts of others, or building, as he put it, ‘on someone else’s foundation’ (Rom. 15:20). He did not always appreciate it when others invaded his mission field, and tried to build on the foundation he had laid. He stayed in any one place only as long as it took to preach the gospel there and build up a strong believing community that would itself be a centre of witness in that area. He concentrated on the most important cities, standing on the main Roman roads; if the gospel took root in them, local believers could use those lines of communication to spread their faith more widely.

Sometimes he entrusted further pastoral ministry among his converts to his colleagues, but this was not always possible. But he had a living faith in the power of the Spirit of Christ in the lives of converts from pagan idolatry and immorality. Although some of his friends thought him unrealistically optimistic, he was convinced his way was the way of Christ.

‘HE WAS CONVINCED HIS WAY  
WAS THE WAY OF CHRIST’

By putting this policy into effect, Paul was able to accomplish a great deal in a short time. In about A.D. 47, there were no Christians that we know of in the important provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. Ten years later, these four provinces had been so thoroughly evangelised that Paul could speak of his work in that part of the world as finished. He looked west, and planned to repeat in Spain the same kind of programme as he had completed in the eastern Mediterranean (Rom. 15:23–24).

The catalogue of hardships and sufferings he had to endure in the course of this activity (2 Cor. 11:23–27) makes one reflect. It suggests he was a man of constitutional toughness and staying power, though that is not how he would have expressed it. To him, all this was a part of the life of faith. The hardships that attended his ministry were not to be endured reluctantly, but embraced joyfully, as a token of acceptance with God, a strengthening of Christian hope, and a participation in the sufferings of Christ. As the hardships wore down the physical frame, they were at the same time used by God for the renewal of the inner being and the increase of the prospective heritage of glory.

## PAUL IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Paul has been misunderstood and ignored over long stretches of Christian history, and in many areas of the church. This should not

surprise us, if we consider how largely he was misunderstood and ignored in his own day. In later life, he had to contemplate a sad falling away from the standards he had set in the province of Asia, the scene of his most intensive missionary service: ‘You know’, he wrote to Timothy, ‘that everyone in [the province of] Asia has deserted me’ (2 Tim. 1:15). He was under house arrest in Rome, unable to visit believers there, and others took advantage of his enforced absence to introduce teaching at variance with his. Happily, healthier influences came to the churches of Asia and restored them to their true allegiance.

Similarly, in the history of Christianity there have repeatedly been great movements of the Spirit, in which the first principles of gospel liberty have been recovered, to the revitalising and enrichment of the church. Almost invariably, these movements can be traced to the influence of Paul and his teaching upon certain individuals, chosen instruments for the work of God, as Paul himself was. It was while reading words from Paul’s letter to the Romans that Augustine found his soul flooded with heavenly light, in A.D. 386. It was in the same letter that Martin Luther learned what ‘the righteousness of God’ really meant – not the righteousness by which God punishes the unrighteous, but the righteousness through which he justifies them by faith. ‘Thereupon,’ he said, ‘I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into Paradise.’ And it was while listening to someone reading Luther’s preface to that letter that John Wesley in 1738 felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’ and experienced

the change that sparked off his own apostolic labours, with the world as his parish.

## PAUL’S LEGACY

Paul, more than any other, recognised the universal implications of the ministry, death and exaltation of Christ. He drew them out in his own teaching, and translated them into practice in his work. He thus bequeathed to succeeding generations a rich legacy, elements of which need to be emphasised as they are so readily forgotten:

True religion is not a matter of rules and regulations. God does not deal with people like an accountant; he accepts them freely as they respond to his grace, and implants the Spirit of Christ in their hearts so they may show his love to others.

In Christ, the children of God have come of age, as the new humanity created by his death and risen life. God treats his children as his responsible grown-up sons and daughters.

People matter more than things, more than principles, more than causes. The loftiest principles and the noblest causes exist for the sake of people; to sacrifice people to them is a perversion of the divine order.

Discrimination against people on such grounds as race, class or sex is an offence against God and humanity.

Those who appreciate these lessons should remember gratefully the one who taught them so plainly.

## FURTHER READING

John Piper, *Why I Love the Apostle Paul* (Crossway, 2019)