



Reflection #2: Paul and Sin

After his meeting with Peter, Paul disappeared for three years. Meanwhile, the fledgling group of believers in Antioch suffered a great loss when their leaders fled the city because of political turmoil. To boost their morale, the leaders in Jerusalem sent Joseph, a convert from Cyprus, nick-named “Barnabas” which means “son of consolation.” After spending a while in Antioch, Barnabas decided he needed help to bring hope to the dispirited community. He went in search of Paul, whom he found in Tarsus in 40 AD and recruited him to work in Antioch. It became their base for the next ten years. During this time, Paul was gifted with a mystical experience of being transported “into the third heaven.”

After a year of ministry in Antioch, Barnabas, Paul and Mark were commissioned by the strengthened community to spread the good news of Jesus the Christ. The three missionaries walked overland (824 kms) to Antioch-in-Pisidia, then to Derbe, Iconium and Lystra where Paul healed a crippled man, was stoned and left for dead. The entire journey probably took 2 to 4 years. Paul took no further interest in these churches since Barnabas probably took faithful responsibility for them. Perhaps this first missionary journey was a kind of internship for Paul?

As they traveled in foreign territory, they encountered numerous dangers - robbers, gangs, slave-traders, traffickers, wild animals, lack of security in inns where theft and murders were common. Paul and Barnabas had to take turns sleeping and guarding their baggage. In this concern for survival, Paul’s concept of sin shifted and developed. He saw that sinful social structures forced him into attitudes of selfishness and self-concern - “everyone for oneself” - and distracted him from the ideal of being focused on Christ. Later on he would write that we are all under the power of sin because we live in a world where we are forced to be other than we desire to be (Rom. 7:15-24). Seeing the difficulty of being true to one’s best self in the face of threats and dangers, Paul came to learn the importance of cooperation for survival.

Paul realized that COMMUNITY was absolutely essential not only for survival, but for living as human beings. He came to see more clearly that only life in COMMUNITY could break down sinful social structures and overcome the radical divisions of society. His concept of sin changed from that of “breaking laws” to that of “breaking community.”

At the end of this first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul parted company.

Read: Rom. 7:15-24; 1Cor.8:9-12; 1Cor.11:17-22; Gal. 5:19-26.

- 1) When have I sought periods of solitude in order to “sort things out” and to allow myself to be re-birthed?
- 2) Who has been a “Barnabas” in my life? - the people who have been my guarantors, mentors, advocates?
- 3) How have my experiences of sinful social structures - racism, sexism, materialism, consumerism, violence, ageism - influenced my understanding of sin?

Hymn: “O Sun of Justice, Fill Our Hearts” #371; (Melody: “When I Behold”)