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Controversies in Mission

Theology, People, and Practice of Mission in the 21st-Century



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Controversies in Mission: Theology, People, and Practice of Mission in the 21st Century

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CHAPTER 1

CONTROVERSY ON PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Lessons for Today

Robert J. Priest

In Acts 13 the Holy Spirit instructed the church of Antioch to set aside Barnabas and Saul for an unspecified work. At the end of their journey, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and specified what their Spirit-given work had involved, *an opening of a door of faith to the Gentiles* (Acts 14:27). Saul had understood more than a decade earlier that he was to be an apostle to the Gentiles, so whatever occurred on this journey was not completely discontinuous from what had come before. Moreover, while followers of Jesus were largely Jewish, they were not exclusively so. Cornelius had already walked through a door of faith. In Antioch, there were not only Gentile proselytes but God-fearing Gentiles that had never become fully Jewish who now followed Jesus. And yet the Antioch mission in those early days, according to Richard Longnecker (1971, 38) was probably "carried out exclusively in terms of the synagogue and as an adjunct to the ministry to Jews, without consideration being given to whether it was proper to appeal more widely and directly to Gentiles" (see also Stott 1990, 202–203). It is to this audience that Paul and Barnabas announce that something new has just taken place in terms of opening a door of faith to the Gentiles.

While early Jewish believers did accept Cornelius, they nonetheless had a difficult time trying to understand the import of his conversion for missiological practice. Moreover, the issues they faced were not entirely different from challenges Christians through history have faced as they struggle with how to engage social others with the gospel.

My parents were Wycliffe missionaries in Bolivia. As a child, I lived across wide cultural-linguistic divides between Siriono Indians,

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Spanish-speaking Bolivians, and North American missionaries. Through primary socialization, members of each group had acquired—within their group—shared language, musical aesthetics, notions of clean and unclean food, and rules of emotional display or moral judgment. Even people's names signaled their community: such as Rafael, Guillermo, Jorge, and Ana-Maria, or Perry, Bill, Cliff, Helen, Marion, or Echobii, Equataya, Jeje, Eanta. My parents' colleagues and supporters knew my father as Perry Priest, but no Siriono could pronounce that name. So they gave him a Siriono name: Taitaeoko. If a reporter today wished to interview Siriono about Perry Priest, she might conclude that Perry Priest was an American urban legend; that he had never lived with the Siriono. However, if she asked about the missionary Taitaeoko, every Siriono could tell stories, and would doubtless point to some young Siriono named after the esteemed missionary Taitaeoko.

In Acts 13 we encounter a similar name change, from Saul to Paul. Christians have often mischaracterized this name change as marking conversion, as in one book I saw in the Wheaton College library that illustrated this with a pre-conversion picture of a dark and swarthy Saul followed by a post-conversion portrait of a radiant and glowing Paul. Our Bible story books for children routinely teach that the Saul-to-Paul name change marked conversion (Berenstain and Berenstain 2013, 254; Bostrom 2004, 38–39; Elkins and O'Connor 2003, 377; Florea and Whiting 2014, 9; Reimann 2014, 15; Strobel and Florea 2015, 97). Scholars also occasionally affirm this idea (Apostolos-Cappadona 2014, 336; Paloutzian 2014, 211; Rambo and Farhadian 2014, 3), as do pastors and devotional writers (Matte 2015, 156–157; Hunt 1995, 119). However, the name shift in the biblical text occurred over a decade after his conversion. Paul, as we will see, like Taitaeoko, is the name of a missionary, not the name of a convert.

Our pastors teach us to think of names in terms of etymology—but this is not particularly helpful here. Saul means "asked for/prayed for." It is a good name acknowledging God as the giver of this life. Paul means "shorty, stumpy, squirt, little"—hardly a better name etymologically.

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It is not because of etymology that, as Johnny Cash reminds us, "Life ain't easy for a boy named Sue," but because names identify us with things like gender or ethnic identity. Sokpyo Hong, Hae-Won Kim, Jinsuk Byun disclose a different ethnic identity than Guillermo Cruz, Rafael Sanchez, Jaime Mendoza, Ana-Maria Lopez. Of course, while we are alert to nuances and distinctions in our contemporary context, nuances and distinctions that would have been obvious to people in the book of Acts may totally escape us 2000 years later. Barnabas, Joseph, and Saul are good Jewish names. Cornelius, Apollos, Silas, and Paul are not. Paul is a Greek name, and also a Roman cognomen. While, as a Roman citizen, Saul would have also had a Roman cognomen—which most biblical scholars believe was Paul, it was the name Saul rather than Paul which he utilized in this initial phase of ministry.

As Barnabas and Saul commence their first missionary journey they initially preach only to Jews within synagogues. Barnabas, the original leader of the missionary band, was a respected Levite, already well-known among Jews in Cyprus where he was from. However, how did Saul introduce himself? Based on the evidence of his pattern elsewhere, he doubtless identified himself as a Jew from Tarsus, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, trained under Gamaliel, named after the first great Jewish king, King Saul, and like King Saul also from the tribe of Benjamin. In the context of ministry to Jews, Saul was a trusted insider name, an important signal of shared Jewish identity.

However, while Barnabas and Saul's ministry on Cyprus was not oriented to reaching Gentiles, it was on Cyprus that they had their first Gentile convert. Moreover, the initial encounter came about not through an intentional missiological strategy on their part, but purely at the initiative of the Gentile. A Roman official, with a Roman name Paul, exercised his political power to demand an accounting from them. This proconsul was not a God-fearing "worshipper at the gate," not already tied into the Jewish religious system. He was simply a Gentile living his life as a Gentile. Moreover, in responding to the Roman Proconsul it is not the older Levite Barnabas who steps to the fore,

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but his younger partner who had been called as an apostle to the Gentiles over a decade earlier. Furthermore, his partner does not introduce himself as Saul, a Benjaminite, Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, but rather as Paul. Our English translations fail to make clear that our apostle, himself a Roman citizen, introduces himself with the same name as the man he is addressing. Paul is speaking to Paul.

In Latin America, there is a word, *tocayo,* by which any two people with the same name can claim a special relationship with each other. If I introduce myself as Roberto, not uncommonly Bolivians or Peruvians with that name have exclaimed, "Ah, that's my name too–we're *tocayos!*" Paul would have made a good Latin American, closing the social distance between himself and the Roman Proconsul, he introduces himself, not with his Jewish name Saul, but with his Roman name Paul. And then he preaches the gospel. Moreover, the Roman Proconsul Paul, his *tocayo,* a Gentile with no prior affinity for Judaism, becomes a believer. This appears to have been an incredible and catalytic event—crystallizing an emergent missiology for Gentile outreach (Longnecker 1995, 215–216; Stott 1990, 220)—a shift that, as we will see, proved highly disturbing to some Jewish followers of Jesus.

The author of Acts marks the significance of this event in several ways. First, it is here that the author of Acts drops all usage of the Jewish name Saul, and permanently shifts to Paul—a shift doubtless reflecting Paul's own shifting usage as he transitioned to a self-conscious focus on Gentiles as his audience (Keener 2013, 2021; Lenski 2008, 503; Witherington 1998, 401; Gonzalez 2003, 72; Horsley 1987, 8). As N. T. Wright explains:

> The name "Saul" didn't play well in the wider non-Jewish world. Its Greek form, "Saulos," was an adjective that described someone walking or behaving in an effeminate way: "mincing" might be our closest equivalent . . . So, like many Jews going out into the Greek world, Paul used a regular Greek name, whether because it was another name he had had all along, which is quite possible, or because it was close

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> to his own real name, just as some immigrants change their names into something more recognizable in the new country. One thing was certain. Paul was serious about getting the message out to the wider world. When you even change your own name, you show that you really mean business. (2008, 6–7)

Like Perry Priest, well-known to Siriono, but only as Taitaeoko, so our missionary in Acts would become famous not under the Jewish name Saul, but rather Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. Only briefly in Acts 22, while speaking to a Jewish crowd in Hebrew, does Paul again refer to himself as Saul. Otherwise, he is known as Paul from here on. It is exclusively as Paul that he identifies in all his writings. For this man, who had been "extremely zealous" for his "ancestral tradition" (Gal 1:14), and who took pride in his ethnic identity (Phil 3:7)—one marker of which was his name Saul, this shift should be understood as no small matter.

A second way that Luke marks the significance of the catalytic event is by signaling a shift in leadership. Before this event, the name Barnabas comes first, Barnabas and Saul—presumably marking Barnabas as leader of the missionary band. However, after the conversion of the Roman Proconsul, Paul's name comes first. It is now Paul and Barnabas. Moreover, in case this is too subtle for us, the first time the team is referenced after the catalytic event, Barnabas' name is dropped altogether, and we are simply told, "Paul and his companions" (Acts 13:13) traveled on. After that, it is "Paul and Barnabas," "Paul and Barnabas."

Luke does not intend us to understand the shift in leadership to be the result of a power struggle, but rather that this was a natural shift given the emerging focus on Gentile mission. While the older Levite, Barnabas, exercised natural leadership in a ministry focused on Jews, the actual encounter with the Roman Proconsul made clear that it was Paul who had exceptional strengths in relating to a Gentile world. Thus, such a shift in leadership was a natural accompaniment to the emerging focus on Gentile mission, with Paul moving into his central

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