

UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but this is my one aim: to forget everything that's behind, and to strain every nerve to go after what lies ahead. I press on toward the finish line, where the prize waiting for me is the upward call of God

IN KING JESUS.

(Philippians 3:13-14)

#11-1710

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Paul's Omissions

According to the testimony of both Jesus and Paul, Paul was Jesus' chosen instrument to bear His name before the nations (gentiles), kings, and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15). Within a few days of meeting the risen and glorified Christ on his way to Damascus, Paul began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues—meaning he went to the sons of Israel first. At various stages of his ministry, Paul also proclaimed the name of Jesus to kings. Although he never lost hope or passion for his fellow countrymen, a day came when he turned to the so-called *gentiles*, a word that is best translated *nations*. As the historical book of Acts ends, staying in rented quarters, Paul told the Jews, ones who could not accept the things spoken by him, they were blind and deaf to the truth, just as Isaiah the prophet had said. He announced: *Therefore, let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the nations (gentiles); they will also listen* (see Acts 28:23-31). This was in perfect alignment with the Psalmist: *That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for You will judge the peoples with uprightness and guide the nations on the earth* (Psalms 67:2-4).

Early in his ministry, Paul was caught up in the controversy of circumcision, a holdover of Judaism and the custom of Moses that some were trying to impose on those converted from among the nations. This led Paul and Barnabas to appear before the Jewish-Christian council at Jerusalem. The question at hand was what to impose on these new so-called *non-Jewish converts*. By their own testimony, the spirit of the Lord directed that they tell them to abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication. That was it; no more, no less. With this agreement, Paul, Barnabas, and Silas were sent off to Antioch, where the news was received with great rejoicing and encouragement (Acts 15). Finally, James, Peter, and John, reputed pillars of the church, gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship so that they might go to the nations and they (James, Peter, John) to the circumcised. All they asked was that Paul remember the poor, the very thing Paul was also eager to do (Galatians 2:9-10).

Clearly, by calling, Paul was the apostle of the nations (uncircumcision) and the original twelve apostles that knew Jesus in the flesh were the apostles of the sons of Israel (circumcision). Given this, Paul proclaimed the name of Jesus as the Son of God to a people that may have had little to no background about the law and customs of Moses. In fact, they had been *excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and were strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world* (Ephesians 2:12). Paul's heart was to give them hope, which is in Christ alone, and he did this to his very end. Through his writings, Paul has continued to be the apostle of the nations, even to our day—and as such, his epistles are vital to our understanding of the new covenant, especially the new creation in Christ. In my opinion, he is unrivaled in his revelation of the centrality, supremacy, and preeminence of the Messiah.

Now, it seems right that Paul would emphasize teachings (i.e., doctrines) that were vital to opening the eyes of the nations to the truth about the Messiah Jesus, including what is vital to salvation and to growth in Christ. It also seems right that he would emphasize the most important teachings of Jesus as they pertain to the nations. But what about the things that Paul did not write about that are contained in other new testament writings? For example, why did Paul never tell the nations that they must be born again or warn them about hell—subjects that are emphasized heavily in the evangelical message of our day? Do these omissions mean something to us today? I submit that they do. As Paul looked into the face of Jesus, he saw something so great and so marvelous that one commentator has called it *the altogether otherness of Christ*. We need our eyes opened to this otherness.

With this in mind, let us consider a few omissions and Paul's otherness that takes us beyond tradition.

The first omission is that one must be **born again** in order to be saved. With little doubt, this is the primary message of the gospel to the so-called *lost*. Then, why is this not declared in Paul's writings? I believe context has much to do with the answer. Like all Jews of that day, Nicodemus believed his birth as a Jew (or, son of Israel) gave him a God-given right to the kingdom—that is, he was granted special privilege simply because of his bloodline. Knowing this, Jesus said that Nicodemus' natural birth would not do—he needed a new birth by the spirit that gives life. Through the cross, Jesus was about to cut the cord of genealogy—opening the door for all to enter the kingdom. As such, a message like this did not have the same impact on a non-Jew (gentile), for they were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel due to their genetic line. I am not suggesting a new birth is no longer necessary, but I see the emphasis shifting because of the so-called *gentiles*. Paul makes the shift as he declares there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all (Colossians 3:11). And, most importantly, all in Christ are *a new creation* and *a one new man*, with every spiritual blessing among the celestials (heavenlies), seated with Christ in the heavenlies (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 1:3; 2:15). Paul's revelation from the risen Christ took the message to new heights—a heavenly one. It is not simply casting aside all distinctions and privileges of the natural; it is taking up something entirely new and not seen before. Paul tells us: *The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly. Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable* (1 Corinthians 15:47-50). This is more than being born again; this is an entirely new constitution—not a reconstituted one based on the flesh but one based on the spirit. I submit, **new creation trumps born again**.

The second omission is that if you do not believe, you will **go to hell**. Most evangelicals make this a vital part of the gospel, but Paul never once mentions hell or any derivation of it. He wrote of not inheriting the kingdom and loss or gain of rewards in relation to works being judged by fire, but never about being cast into an eternal inferno called *hell*. How could Paul overlook such a *seemingly* essential teaching, especially to the nations? After all, didn't Jesus teach on hell? Not really! Jesus spoke of *gehenna of fire* in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, thus casting Judaism and the temple out of the economy of God. Paul wrote that **God wills all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, each in his own order** (1 Timothy 2:4; 1 Corinthians 15:23).

The third omission is that Paul never tells anyone that they have to **ask Jesus into their heart**. His testimony is that God through grace *revealed His Son in me* (Galatians 1:15-16). For Paul, everything begins and ends with God and His Son, even our faith; **saved by grace through the faith of the Son of God. No longer I, but Christ lives in me!**

The fourth omission is that Paul never mentions the **priesthood of every believer**. Why doesn't Paul, the apostle of the nations, expend some print explaining this to the nations? After all, how could non-Jews (gentiles) understand this if they were never exposed to such a thing? Now, Peter mentions it, but he wrote to the Israelites in dispersion, not to the nations at large (1 Peter 1:1; 2:9). And, Jesus, as the Lambkin of God, declares that those purchased with His blood are a kingdom and priests (Revelation 5:10). So, granted, the case is made that believers are priests. However, Paul's message is all about sonship, which touches the very heart of the Father. Paul's vision is of God's ultimate goal to have many sons. *He who is conquering shall inherit these things, and I shall be a God to him and he shall be a son to Me* (Revelation 21:7; also, Hebrews 2:10). I propose that sonship is greater than a priest or a servant. Yes, a son can be these as well. However, sonship places the believer in a much more intimate and personal, familial relationship with God (Galatians 4:6-7). This is the heart of *God is love!*

The fifth omission is that Paul never refers to believers as **Christians**. Peter does once and some outside of Christ did, but that is it. Why? Paul does not see our identity in a label but in Christ Jesus Himself. *For me, to live is Christ*. The world looks for labels and titles, but we are to manifest a life, *Christ who is our life*.

Undoubtedly, there are other omissions. My point is not so much to challenge the traditional views (although I do somewhat) but to challenge one to go beyond these to the *otherness* of the good news of Jesus. Paul seems to transcend the traditional views. He testified that he *did not shrink from declaring the whole purpose of God* (Acts 20:27). I believe we need to listen carefully to him, even in his omissions.