

ST. PAUL
THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES
WHO ARE TODAY’S GENTILES?

A sermon preached at Vespers on the eve of the feast of St. Paul the Apostle

by Professor Valerie Karras

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Thank you for inviting me back to speak here at St. Paul’s (I’m sure that my cousin, Father Steve, being the *proestamemos* here is purely coincidental). One of the reasons I enjoy coming here (in addition to enjoying the usually warm and sunny weather of southern California) is that I find the Greek Orthodox community of St. Paul’s in Irvine an exciting example of the increasing acculturation and indigenization of the Orthodox Church in the United States. So, when I started thinking about just what aspect of the Apostle Paul’s theology I wanted to lift up this evening, the question of the relationship between faith and culture seemed a natural one. I believe that Paul’s life and apostolic activity can provide a warning and a guide to us today – a warning of how *not* to act in excluding others, and a guide to lead us to the same calling as that which Christ gave to this parish’s patron saint.

The Apostle Paul, as most of you probably know, is known as the apostle to the Gentiles. Actually, his missionary work among the Gentiles was just one of

several reasons why Paul was a controversial figure, viewed with great suspicion by the original Twelve, the apostles who formed Christ's inner circle during his ministry on earth. And, no wonder. Paul, or Saul, as he was originally known, was a man so committed to the orthodox (small "o") faith of his people, that, out of that commitment, he zealously persecuted the first Christians (Acts 8:3). In fact, his conversion experience occurred while he was on the way to Damascus in order to ferret out more Christians from the synagogues there (Acts 9:1-3). And, then, there's the manner of his conversion and call by Christ himself. To whom else did Christ appear after his ascension in order personally to commission him as his apostle? When Saul tried to join the Christian community, no one wanted anything to do with him. Ananias actually argued with God (Acts 9:13-14) when the Lord told him to seek out Saul, who was waiting for Ananias to heal him of the blindness he suffered during his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Of course, the Scripture words it all very nicely and respectfully, but the basic tenor – in colloquial speech – would be, "Are You nuts? Why don't You just tell me to slit my throat?" But, Ananias went.

Then, when Paul – as he called himself after his conversion – began preaching the gospel in Damascus, he totally confused people, Christians and non-Christians alike. In fact, it took the Jewish leaders a while to catch on that he really had switched sides. Once they caught on, though, it didn't take them long to realize

that they needed to take this guy out; he was proving entirely too successful. So, word gets to Paul that there's a price on his head. The Christians in Damascus sneak him out over the city walls in a basket, and he makes his way to Jerusalem (Acts 9:23-25). You'd think that word of his conversion would already have reached the church there. Maybe it had, but people had very vivid recollections of Paul's support for the stoning of the deacon Stephen; they weren't inclined to be suicidally naïve. So, when Paul tried to join the Christian community in Jerusalem, everyone was afraid of him and wanted nothing to do with him (Acts 9:26). It was as if a known former KGB agent had tried to approach the underground Orthodox Church in the days of the communist Soviet Union. You can imagine how welcome he would have been. Such was also the case with Paul. As a matter of fact, Barnabas had to stand up for him and convince the apostles that Paul really was one of them now. Of course, once he was accepted and began preaching the gospel, it didn't take long before he gained the confidence of the Church and the enmity of the civil and, especially, the religious authorities in Jerusalem, just as he had done in Damascus.

So, Paul wandered around for a while with Barnabas. It was while they were working with the Christian community in Antioch that yet another dispute arose. At this point, everyone accepted Paul as a true Christian as opposed to a wolf in sheep's clothing. The issue this time wasn't about Paul himself, but about his

approach toward Gentile converts. Paul's opponents and critics, non-Hellenized Jews from Judaea, charged that, unless Gentile converts were circumcised, they would not be saved (Acts 15:1). In other words, in order to be Christian, they had to be Jewish. Paul and Barnabas sharply disagreed with them; when it became obvious that no one was budging, they all traveled to Jerusalem to bring the matter before the Church there and to receive from "the apostles and elders" (Acts 15:6) an official decision.

At the council in Jerusalem, the Judaeans Christians won support from those Christians who were of the sect of the Pharisees; like the Judaeans, they believed that the community must remain Jewish – i.e., the converts must be circumcised (Acts 15:5). However, Paul found an unlikely ally in Peter. Originally, the Apostle Peter had been of the same mind as his fellow Judaeans. But, Peter had had his own little conversion experience via a vision of clean and unclean animals that God had sent him shortly before he was contacted by the Gentile centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10). So, Peter took to heart God's lesson, and applied it not only to Cornelius but also to the situation in which Paul found himself. Therefore, Peter stood up and defended Paul; this time he believed him because he, too, had been given a specific mission to Gentiles by God directly.

As you know, the apostolic church of Jerusalem decided that Gentiles did *not* need to adhere to the Mosaic Law in order to be Christian, i.e., that non-Jews did

not have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. Unfortunately, this was not the end of the matter for the fledgling Church. The Apostle Paul found that the same dispute had arisen within the capital city of the Roman Empire. So, in his epistle to the Romans, he devoted about half the letter to the question of the relationship of Gentile Christians to the Mosaic Law. Paul recognized the Gentiles as having been given by God the fundamentals of the Law, a natural law “written on their hearts” (Rom. 2:15). The Jews could not consider themselves superior to the Gentiles “since *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Jewish Christians would be saved not by a strict adherence to the Law but by their faith in Christ, which would naturally lead them to observe the spirit of the Law.

Now, biblical scholars regularly examine Paul’s epistle to the Romans as an example of the tension between Jews and Gentiles in the apostolic Church. But, it is much more than that. Paul’s exhortation to the Christian community in Rome has relevance for us today. Sociologists have frequently noted the similarities between Greek and Jewish cultures – both have Mediterranean roots, strong family structures, both have endured long periods of oppression or persecution through a tenacious sense of survival and independence. Most important for us, though, is that both Greek and Jewish cultures have included their faith as an inalienable part of their cultural identity. Greeks are often puzzled and even bewildered when confronted with ethnic Greeks who are not Orthodox.

The reverse is equally true, and, in our American context, has greater ramifications for the life of the Church. Just as the Apostle Paul had to deal with members of the Church who believed that all Christians must adopt Jewish customs, we often are confronted with those who believe that converts to Orthodoxy must become Greek. I remember a conversation several years ago with a choir director who refused to use English in the Divine Liturgy. When I pointed out that the Church's tradition was to use the language of the people, and that an entirely Greek liturgy would likely be alienating and spiritually unfulfilling for converts as well as cradle Orthodox who were not fluent in Greek, he replied, "If they want an English liturgy, they can go to the Episcopalian Church."

Fortunately, St. Paul's in Irvine appears to be a community that welcomes non-Greeks. I congratulate you for this, but I lament that it is seen as something rare and noteworthy in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The Apostle Paul has made it clear, both from his confrontation with the Judaean Christians in Antioch and Jerusalem and from his epistle to the Romans, that as Christians we cannot impose an ethnicity upon those who come to the faith. Paul refused to force Jewish customs upon the Gentile Christians even though those "customs" were in fact the Law given by God to Moses. Yet, our Church in this country has for decades experienced tension between maintaining our Hellenic ethnic identity and welcoming non-Hellenes into our Orthodox faith.

I would suggest that we have made the balance between faith and culture difficult and controversial in our Church only because we have failed to heed the consistent witness of St. Paul. No one could have been more Jewish than Saul-become-Paul (2 Corinthians 11:22). Nevertheless, the apostle to the Gentiles maintained a clear sense of priorities. Christ was at the top of that list of priorities, with his Jewish cultural – and even religious – heritage a distant second (Philippians 3:4-10). Paul was aware that trying to enforce the Mosaic Law on Gentiles would result in fewer Gentiles’ becoming Christian. Nothing could be more inimical to the Lord’s charge to him. Rather than expecting new converts to conform to the cultural and religious “small t” traditions of the Church’s Jewish roots, Paul was willing to be “all things to all men” (I Corinthians 9:22) in order to bring people to Christ.

Paul’s life and words thus challenge us in the Orthodox Church today. Like Paul, we live in an ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse society. Like Paul, we are faithful members of a religious tradition whose cultural roots are anchored deeply into our collective psyche. Are we willing to be “all things to all people” in order to bring people to Christ, or do we believe that the Church’s mission is only to those raised as Greek Orthodox and others who are willing to conform to our linguistic and cultural traditions as well as the tenets of our faith and worship? Are we able to see our Hellenic culture as something that can add a

unique dimension to our Orthodox faith, or do we assume that Hellenism is the only context in which that faith can be lived? Do we consistently welcome others into our communities or do we secretly – or even openly – maintain a “love it or leave it” attitude toward Greek Orthodoxy? “If they want an English liturgy, they can go to the Episcopalian Church.”

But, it is not enough simply to welcome others, although certainly we are obligated to do so. The Apostle Paul challenges even those of us who warmly welcome others into our community of faith; he calls on all of us to be apostles as well. That is, we must take seriously our own apostolic mission to the millions of unchurched in this country; we cannot just wait for them to come to us. The Orthodox Church through the centuries has prided itself on not engaging in the kind of proselytism so prevalent in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union today, where certain evangelical Protestants assume that an atheist state means an atheist people and that those raised in the Orthodox faith aren't *really* Christian. Our recognition of the Christianity of other confessions and peoples may be admirable, but are we not called to witness to Christ among the vast number of Americans who have *no* strong connection to a church?

We often seem to be held captive by our immigrant roots – we think of the Church as something that exists primarily to serve the spiritual needs of those of Greek descent. And, of course, the Church must serve those needs, but we cannot

see the Orthodox Church as limited to Greeks. We must broaden our vision to the larger human community, and not in a passive sense. What do I mean by passive? Well, for example, if someone marries a Greek, or if a couple or family somehow find out on their own about the Orthodox Church, then of course we welcome them into the faith and our community. But, basically, most Orthodox expect converts to come to *us*. We feel no sense of obligation to make our faith known to people, and are sometimes hesitant to do in public even the most simple acts which might reveal our Orthodox Christian background, e.g., to pray and do the sign of the cross before eating a meal at a restaurant with non-Orthodox friends or colleagues. When we do consider our Church's obligation to bring others to the faith, we usually think of it as someone else's job – the priest's, the theologian's, missionaries whom we support through the Mission Center. But, it is not sufficient simply to provide funding to others to witness to Christ; we, too, are called to witness to him.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should accost strangers on the bus with a little pamphlet outlining the Orthodox Church's history and beliefs. But, I *am* suggesting that we take advantage of opportunities that offer themselves. One of the things that I've noticed about many people who are not connected to a faith community is that, deep down, they really *want* to be part of one. Perhaps they had a negative church experience in their past, or they may not have found their

previous religious community spiritually fulfilling; whatever the case, many of these people have a need to talk about these experiences and their spiritual hunger. Every day, we work with people, we go to school with people, we sit in the doctor's waiting room with people who need what Christ and his Church can offer them. When they show openness to a conversation about faith in God, when they tentatively broach the subject with us with an offhand remark such as "This New Age stuff is really weird, isn't it?", do we respond or do we withdraw?

You see, St. Paul's mission to evangelize the world is not done. His mission is not accomplished even in this country with its Bible Belt and a population which attends church regularly in higher numbers than any other country with a Christian history. The Apostle Paul has, through his life and writings, laid out for us a blueprint for our own lives. Of course, we are not all called to leave home and family and wander the globe with little besides the clothes on our backs. But, we *are* called to make our Church as accessible and inviting to non-Greeks as to Greeks, as spiritually rewarding to those who have never heard of Orthodoxy as to those raised in the faith. We cannot be Jews who demand that Gentile converts become Jews, too; in other words, we cannot be Greeks who demand that converts to Orthodoxy become Greek, too. We cannot tell them to go to another church, not if we believe that Orthodoxy truly has the fullness of the faith. Moreover, we are – each one of us – called to witness to our faith every day in a myriad of small ways.

We are all obliged to take advantage – in a loving, open, non-aggressive way – of the opportunities to share our love of Christ and his Church with those who seek a more fulfilling relationship with our Lord. Jesus Christ, through the Apostle Paul, calls *all of us* to apostleship. *All of us* must emulate the example of St. Paul; we must become the apostles to the Gentiles of this day and age.



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