

Easter 3, 2013. Paul charisma, and institution.

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There is, I think, significant irony representing a significant loss, that by the third century what was to become the most significant office in the Western Church – the Papacy – was basing its claim to preeminence on the Apostle Peter.

Why Rome – and thus its bishop – became so is complex, but the two most obvious reasons are that Rome was the capital of the Empire, and that no other city could claim the martyrdom of two towering figures of the faith: Peter and Paul.

The New Testament's gospels all witness that Jesus and his inner circle – called "The Twelve" – were all Jewish, including Peter. Likewise the New Testament letters that preceded the gospels – written by another Jew, Paul.

But sometime around 20 years after Jesus' crucifixion there was a split. Peter and those Jesus followers still based in Jerusalem went in one theological direction, Paul in another.

The Jerusalem community was still closely tied to Judaism. Paul, on the other hand, believed that the Jesus' vision of a reformed world should be shared with non-Jews: Gentiles.

Within about 25 years the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem had virtually vanished – the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. being the clincher. Henceforth, Christianity was a Gentile faith.

So why claim authority through Peter – who had, as his last act before Jesus' crucifixion, denied Jesus not one but three times – and not through Paul?

And the question's even more pointed considering that the Christianity that emerged in the early Church was one built by Paul – his theology from his letters is the foundation for all that has followed. Paul's theology – not any from Peter – and not as much from Jesus himself – is who we are.

I'm pretty sure that the story we hear today from the Acts of the Apostles holds the key to that choice, and that a particular word that comes out of that experience explains the reason.

The story of Paul's Damascus Road experience is the story of a personal encounter – a charismatic moment – and the word that is important in relation to it is this: **AUTHORITY!**

Paul claims his apostolic authority from having met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Since Jesus had been crucified a number of years previous to this moment Paul isn't talking about the sort of encounter that Peter could speak of. This was a mystic encounter, a moment of religious ecstasy, a charismatic moment that changed the way Paul saw Jesus and the world – both literally and metaphorically, and transformed his life.

I don't think we truly understand exactly how radical a change this moment makes in Paul's life. It would be as if Adolph Hitler showed up at a synagogue after "Kristallnacht" – the Night of

Broken Glass – in 1938 and said to the congregation “I’ve become a Jew”. The response would have been just as incredulous in the synagogue as it would have been for the followers of Jesus when Paul showed up in Damascus, was baptized, and began immediately to proclaim the most basic of Christian proclamations: “Jesus is Lord”. When asked by what authority he could say this he always quoted the Damascus Road encounter, and the charge he received there.

We all know that Paul was true to that moment and his baptism – he was a follower for the rest of his life. He died for Jesus in Rome during the Neroan persecution of 64 A.D.

It’s pretty obvious in Paul’s writing that he doesn’t have much time for institutional structures! His experience is charismatic, and it’s that experience – the powerful guiding force of the Spirit of God – that Paul sees as the controlling experience of his life – and by extension by that of the communities he founded.

That style of community and of leadership can work very well in the short term. But the record of human history is that we can’t stand the lack of structure and the related lack of clarity for very long.

Hence Paul’s letters. A consistent theme in them is the dangers of charismatic leadership when clear guidelines and structures are absent. He writes to the Corinthian community at least five times that we know of, seeking to provide those clear guidelines and structures.

What he writes is wonderful. Where he writes from – that mystic encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road – is equally wonderful.

But we should be under no illusion that – with real predictability – later followers of Jesus will create institutional structures and patterns of authority that seek to domesticate the more effervescent and Spirit-led parts of Christianity because they represent a threat to institutional control.

Paul was a Charismatic believer. Peter, it would appear, was not. Peter is therefore more useful to the developing Church than Paul for those who are trying to develop those institutional structures and patterns of authority. And an added bonus is that there’s so little (if anything) that Peter wrote that this next generation could claim almost anything in his name!

This is not to say that such claims initially lacked integrity – there’s clearly a quite early stream of tradition that leans toward a more institutional view of how the Church should develop.

But the consequences of a Church that is overly institutional but lacks room for the presence of the Spirit – no matter how messy that is – are always going to be bad, and sometimes disastrous. Over the next 1700 years many will die because of this choice. The price of easily controlling the message and the institution who seeks to proclaim it will be counted in human blood and institutional integrity.

By the mid-2nd Century “free-Spirited actions and individuals” weren’t tolerated, but were

suppressed – though what becomes Mainstream Christianity wasn't adverse to charging such "Spirit-led" movements as the Montanists (who some claim as precursors of present day Pentecostals) as being heretical while at the same time claiming Montanist martyrs as their own – we still celebrate the amazing steadfastness and sacrifice of Perpetua and her companions every March 7 – the day she was murdered in the arena in Carthage. She and her companions were Montanists.

The Church's history has been filled with such struggles. The Reformation, the birth of the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist Churches – all can be seen as the struggle between an institution that had atrophied and a Spirit-led minority seeking freedom to live in that gift and light.

We're living in an age where these struggles are re-appearing. I believe we need to listen to the story of Paul on the Damascus Road with ears that can hear what is therein contained, which is a vital reminder to us that if we don't make room for the Spirit of God in our religious expressions, our churches, and our own lives then our common future is at risk; The consequences for us of a closed-off view of what it means to be the Body of Christ and of what is and is not appropriate religious expression are never going to be good.

The alternative brings its own challenges, not the least that giving up on our desire to control can be messy! But it brings significant blessings as well, ones that can transform us.

In this Easter season isn't that what we seek?