

## TO VISIT CEPHAS

Sometimes we read a passage from the Bible, and it feels like people do not give very much credence to what is written. For an increasing number of people, it seems apparent that the story of Jesus is just another story. If a story, or some portion of it, is told well, they may laugh or cry for the moment, depending on what mood is struck. But that is not the same thing as taking it seriously, taking it to heart, letting it become the structure and foundation – the warp and woof – of our very lives. It's getting harder and harder to tell what we should and should not take seriously.

Paul took his experience on the Damascus Road seriously. I know people who do not take such experiences seriously *even when they themselves have had these very experiences*. Whatever the immediate impact, such “touches” from The Beyond are disturbing and disorienting. And I know nobody who has made it through very many years with no “touches” at all. I know some people who *claim* they have had no significant spiritual experiences – until they stop for a while, get quiet inside, and give their minds a chance to remember. And I know some people who discount their spiritual experiences even after they remember – warding them off, determined to pay no attention. Lots of us walk past burning bushes for years and never turn aside to pay any attention to them. Paul could have waited it out also. God would have let him up for air in a few days. He could then have withdrawn from active persecution of Christians, perhaps, and gone on about his life as a rabbi. Many have avidly wished that he had done so, and consider that the world would be better off if he *had* done so. Some of *you* have been struck hard by the Spirit but are trying to shake it off – trying to go on with your own life as a rabbi or an engineer or entrepreneur or whatever.

Last week we thought about the four opening words of Paul's letter to the Galatians: “*From Paul, an apostle.*” Despite the fact that the word “apostle” (messenger, envoy) has acquired such a high reputation in Christendom, we toyed with coming to a greater awareness of our own apostleship. It is clear that we will hear the letter to the Galatians on a very different level if we accept our own apostleship. It is also clear that if disciples do not become apostles, Christianity will die. If disciples do not become apostles, Christianity has not sunk in; it is still a spectator sport. We may be taking notes, even making astute comments on how

others are playing the game, but if disciples do not become apostles, we are not yet part of the game – part of the new LIFE. Suddenly there is nothing theoretical about this old warrior’s experiences and observations. Paul’s life reveals the real nature of Christianity. It does not make him right about everything – not at all! But it does make him terribly relevant.

*“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.”* You see? If you are *not* apostles, then this is a fine old historic statement, and maybe on its best day it seems like good rhetoric as well. But it doesn’t really matter much, one way or the other. Most people wouldn’t get out of bed to hear it or think about it. And of course, thousands of people prove that every Sunday.

But if *you* are an apostle, that makes it very different. Then I can ask: Is the gospel *you* carry of human origin? And you are compelled to reply. I don’t mean you are coerced to reply; I mean that the question itself is compelling. You cannot be an apostle without wrestling with this issue. It affects everything we do as apostles. Does the message we carry come only from human institutions? Is it merely the product of how we were raised? It most certainly was not the product of how Paul was raised! Is it the result of our love or respect or fear of those who taught us or cared about us? Do you carry a “hand-me-down” religion? Or is it true for you also that it did not come from any human origin?

I cannot answer such questions for you, though I often try, as you know. But I do know that I resonate with Paul’s comments. It was not the Damascus Road for me; I have never lived in Syria. But it was under a Pepper Tree about thirty miles and fifty-three years from here. I was shown what exists elsewhere, and what is to come, and the first glimmers of what was expected of me. It was certainly nothing expected by any humans. And yes, it changed my path forever. I was young, and I realize I might have been overly impressionable; if you were to talk to me about it on a conversational level, I might be perfectly willing to muse with you about psychological phenomena, and illusions and delusions. Only, when we were all through talking, I would still know that what I saw there was reality, and that what I know here is only shadow – only partial, half-life – and however much we are loved or love each other, we are still struggling to become real. Sometimes in my own life I become more shadowy, and sometimes I become more real – and I watch it happening to all those around me. It is why I love the story of Pinocchio. And sometimes I sit here before the service wondering how I got here, and does it matter, and can I continue. And then I look up, out the

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window here in the sanctuary, and there is ... that pepper tree. All of *you* know that this is a mere coincidence. But I don't walk past burning bushes as easily as I used to.

In any case, I resonate with Paul. I did not convert myself. It was not any human's idea or plan. My faith and the tasks that come from it are not of human origin. I certainly have picked up a great deal of help, support, error, opposition, and encouragement from many humans all along the Way. But at the core and center of it, it is not from any human origin. There are times when knowing this becomes essential for any apostle. That is why I ask you: Is your apostleship from any human origin? Are you trying to carry a hand-me-down religion?

Most of you have realized that in some fashion you are an apostle. Sometimes, like me, you neglect or forget it. But the truth is that on some level, you also are a messenger – an envoy of the God who, in mercy and love, chose to reveal himself in Jesus the Christ. And on some level, harder and harder to keep vague, you realize that you also are sent to some area or situation of life as a disciple/apostle of Jesus. Moreover, beyond other joys and trials, that is the deepest reason for your being, and the source of the best energy and satisfaction you have ever known. Is it clear to you, my friends, that the Gospel you have received – and now carry – is not of human origin? I am very interested in your answer. I like to know and hear about such things. But I do not need to know this answer. YOU need to know! Are you on your own – a free agent? Can you take it or leave it alone? Are you a servant of some group or institution or gathering of people? Or are you, when it comes down to it, an envoy of the Christ? It makes a difference.

Paul remembers his own faith journey. His conversion had been remarkable. We would expect him to have run almost immediately to Jerusalem to visit with the apostles who had walked with Jesus. Why was he off to Arabia (to think and to ponder and to pray), when he could have been going to Jerusalem – to the human sources of information about Jesus? He would go to them eventually, but it was not his primary need. By the way, Paul went to Mount Sinai, the Holy Mountain of Moses and Elijah. If I say to you “Arabia,” you think what? East of Damascus? It's five hundred miles across the trackless Syrian Desert to Baghdad; one thousand miles to Dhahran on the Persian Gulf; nine hundred miles south of Damascus to Mecca. That is our notion of Arabia. But why would Paul have headed to such places? Whatever our geography, Paul

mentions his own in Galatians 4:25: “*Sinai is a mountain in Arabia.*” After his conversion, Paul headed for the Holy Mountain. Of course.

Is it clear and significant to you like it is for me? Paul is our link (the connection) to Christianity as Holy-Spirit-guided life – in contrast to Christianity as an institutional structure, a thing passed down by human authority. In the Christianity of the Holy Spirit, prayer is the focal point. It depends upon each individual’s personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ is the power – the living and guiding presence for each of us. We gather and we have organizations, but they exist to enhance and supplement. They are not our primary loyalty or allegiance. The presence of the Holy Spirit with us *outranks all other things*: mate, church, children, security, Bible, boss, anything. When we are lucky, there is no quarrel, and often our mates, our children, the church, our security, the Bible, our boss, and our friends may greatly help and enhance our pilgrimage and our purpose for being here: our apostleship. But if and when it comes down to it, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is number ONE – top priority, allegiance, obedience – the source of our comfort, and our true security.

In any form of institutional Christianity, the Holy Spirit may receive honorable mention, but it is not central – it is not the highest priority. Overt, objective authority is primary to and outranks the subjective dangers of personal prayer. The Bible, creeds, and often humans with ecclesiastical authority must be obeyed ahead of the Holy Spirit. Please, I am not mocking – only trying to distinguish. Humans have good reason to fear the errors and mistakes of subjective judgments and decisions, and all true prayer is subjective. That is why true Christianity is so scary. It is also why institutional Christianity is often dull and dreary: duty instead of passion; rules and obligations instead of the transforming power of God’s personal love and destiny and guidance.

Please do not misunderstand me. I love Peter; Peter was wonderful, and I happen to believe that Peter himself was guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus through most of his later life. But that is not how most of Christendom sees or understands Peter. Peter was the first Pope. The true authority of the church has been passed down the human chain from Peter to each succeeding Pope. The power (and protection from error) is in the institution, not in the personal relationship of each individual with God. People in the institution may still have a personal relationship with God (though most do not), but if so, it is circumscribed by traditions, creeds, biblical interpretations,

and people who have risen to positions of authority – all a very logical checks-and-balances to individual subjectivity. The problem is: by this logical, careful, sane approach, Moses would never have gone back to Egypt; Elijah would never have defied Jezebel and Ahab; Jeremiah would never have made prophet; and, most certainly, Jesus would never have gone to the Cross.

It is clear and obvious but needs saying: Paul was not among the twelve who walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Paul was not converted by any of the twelve who walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. Paul was converted by the Holy Spirit directly and personally – after it was all over. Or at least after most people *thought* it was all over. Paul claims his apostleship by the reality of the Holy Spirit's personal influence and guidance in his life. Paul comprehends and identifies with the Message of Jesus – with grace and forgiveness, with surrender and obedience, with a life of prayer – and Paul identifies with Jesus' death and resurrection at least as much as, and probably more deeply than, any of those who walked with Jesus in the flesh. Eventually Paul would disagree with Peter on one of the most important issues in the entire history of the early church, and Peter would realize that Paul was right. And from every available human perspective, Paul was the most dedicated, most fearless, most effective, most tireless apostle of them all.

You understand what this means, don't you? You do *not* have to be part of the institution to get it. You do *not* have to be present with Jesus in His earthly ministry to get it. You do *not* have to have it passed to you from Peter or any other human source to get it. The Holy Spirit of our Resurrected Lord is alive – and unlimited by time and space – and YOU can be touched and converted and appointed just as deeply, just as authentically, just as powerfully and personally and completely ... as any other human who has ever walked this earth! Christianity is not a hand-me-down religion. We can go at it that way if we insist. We can ward off the Holy Spirit's touch. We are granted that kind of free will, if we are determined to use it. We can limit ourselves to institutions, to what others say, to what others have written – if we insist. But Christianity is not a hand-me-down religion. The God of our Lord and Savior is a personal God. And he does not want from you what he has ever wanted from anybody else. God does not sit up in Heaven saying, "Oh shoot, they all look alike to me." But YOU are the one who must decide to let God in beyond institutions, rules, creeds, and what

anybody else wants or expects of you. All those things can have value, but they cannot be at the center – not if we want to walk in the WAY of Jesus Christ.

Have I skipped over it too lightly?

*“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.”* Paul is establishing his freedom to, if necessary, speak and act independently from any earthly authority or institution. *And* he is telling the Galatian Christians that, if necessary, they must be ready to do that too. Things were getting hot. The Jerusalem church, we suspect, was getting close to issuing an official statement designed to close down Paul’s ministry and authority. Paul is actually saying to them: “Even if I myself am dumb enough (or unfaithful enough) to recant what I have told you about the grace and mercy and personal presence of Jesus Christ, don’t pay any attention to me. Pay attention to what you yourselves have experienced with the Holy Spirit.” (Galatians 1:8, paraphrased)

I believe that all human beings are hungry and searching for spiritual life: for connection with God; for awareness of the destiny that connects them with the Kingdom beyond this world. It even seems to me that all of our most powerful appetites – for sex, money, food, power, fame, land, recognition – are physical manifestations of a far deeper spiritual yearning. And that these appetites are fraught with evil precisely because we do not understand the magnitude of what is driving us and what is calling to us.

When we get converted – when we awaken to God’s presence, so close and caring – the shift of perspective and emphasis is immense and overwhelming. It is then imperative to know that this change – this revelation, this new awareness – is not of human origin. Otherwise we will subvert it, find ways to deny it, or assign it to serve human institutions, human authorities, friends, relatives, or our own desires – and quickly end up back where we started, or worse. And the cry then is the cry of disillusionment, cynicism, and lost faith. And we cry as if we had no part in the loss of this WAY that leads to all we most seek, and all we most want, in life.

Once established – clear in his mind and heart about who he was and what he was about – Paul went back to Damascus and tried to start a ministry there. Now that Christ was with him, now that he had turned

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his will and his life over, now that he was truly converted ... *he failed miserably*. The effort was a disaster. It would be another seven or eight years before Paul would come out of Cilicia, team up with Barnabas, and go to preach for the first time to the Galatians – and then later write this letter to them. Just a little realism and reminder for those of us who keep wanting to turn the Christian pilgrimage into instant success or a short-range security blanket. I am talking to myself, of course; I'm the one who keeps wanting to rush things. Only, that's not how it works.

Anyway, it was three years after his conversion before Paul got around to visiting with the people who had known Jesus here on earth. Does that sink in? Do you promise never to forget?

Paul and Peter did finally get together. I like that very much. It is good when Christians get together, especially when they remember that they are not under each other's authority. *“Three years later I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas, and I stayed two weeks with him.”* Cephas, of course, is Aramaic for “rock,” the nickname Jesus gave to Simon, whom we call, from the Greek, *Petros* – Peter. Just in case you wonder, there is no doubt: Cephas is Peter.

Nevertheless: *“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.”* And even if you first hear about it from me ... when it really comes to you, it will not be of human origin for you either.