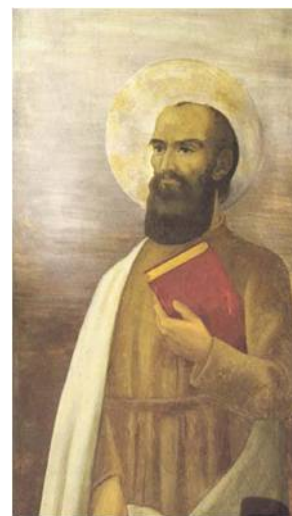


7. THE CHURCH EMBRACES UNIVERSALITY

In their evangelizing activities, Paul and Barnabas experienced firsthand how the Spirit, of his own initiative and without asking for any human guarantees, “opened the hearts” of the pagans who, in their turn, joyfully welcomed the words of the missionaries and turned to Christ. This experience gave rise to an important question: Can Christians from pagan back-grounds receive baptism solely on the basis of their faith in Jesus? Or do they first have to practice the rites and norms of the Jewish religion, primarily circumcision, like the Christians from Jewish backgrounds? Today, this question might seem to have little relevance but that was not the case for the Jewish Christians of Paul’s time, who scrupulously observed the rules and regulations prescribed by Jewish law. It was not easy to distinguish between traditional Jewish religious practices, founded on a certain interpretation of Sacred Scripture, and the message of Jesus, who fulfilled Scripture by giving it a new and unexpected dimension. Jews did not go out to spread their Faith because it was the Faith of their fathers and therefore something that belonged to them exclusively. Paul, unlike the other Apostles, who remained in Jerusalem, saw how receptive the pagans were to the Gospel and, above all, he witnessed the gratuitous work of the Spirit. Thus he declared that faith springs from acceptance of the Gospel, which is Jesus, the only One who can give salvation, and not from religious practices or other teachings!



Santagata, St. Paul

Paul reminds the Galatians of this, after hearing that certain Judaizers had convinced these new converts that they had to perform specific external works in order to be true Christians:

There is only one thing I should like you to tell me: How was it that you received the Spirit—was it by the practice of the Law, or by believing in the message you heard? Having begun in the Spirit, can you be so stupid as to end in the flesh? Can all the favors you have received have had no effect at all—if there really has been no effect? Would you say, then, that he who so lavishly sends the Spirit to you, and causes the miracles among you, is doing this through your practice of the Law or because you believe the message you heard? (Ga. 3:1-5)

The question of whether or not to admit pagans to baptism without placing other conditions on them triggered a heated debate in Jerusalem. Opinions were deeply divided. Paul and Barnabas said that it was enough for converted pagans to believe in the crucified and risen Jesus, to be sorry for their sins, to receive baptism and to live the faith they had received. Instead, a good number of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem insisted it was necessary that pagan converts to Christianity first be circumcised and practice the Law of Moses before receiving baptism.

Paul was convinced that to impose the Jewish Law on the pagans was not in conformity with the Gospel and gave rise to at least two major problems. The first was that such a demand failed to recognize that faith in Christ is the sole condition for salvation. The second was to force pagan converts to isolate themselves from their own societal context and live as Jews..

According to Paul, such a step would transform the Church of Jesus from a community of faith into a new Jewish sect. Instead, Christianity is not a sect but a single body of believers saved by Christ, without distinction of race, culture, sex or religious background. Paul was so convinced of this that he called Christians a “new creation” born of the cross of Christ, who broke down every dividing wall.

As a result of this controversy, when Paul and Barnabas returned from their missionary trip, an assembly (the first Church “Council”) was held in Jerusalem to clarify the identity of the Church and of the Christians (Acts 15:1-6). With the consent of Peter (Acts 15:7-12) and the input of James (Acts 15:13-21), it was decided that the Law of Moses would not be imposed on pagan converts.

Instead, these new Christians were simply asked to observe several rules to strengthen their communion with the Christians from Jewish backgrounds. From the very start, the Church has had both traditional and progressive members who have nevertheless managed to live in profound communion with one another. Paul was very sensitive to the issue of communion. In fact, he organized collections for the poor in Jerusalem precisely so as to strengthen this spirit of communion (2 Co. 8-9).



Teresa Groselj fsp,
The Jerusalem Assembly

The Jerusalem Assembly approved Paul's method of evangelizing and the unity of the Church was safeguarded. Paul describes this important moment as follows:

When James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (Ga. 2:9).

Paul's zeal to disseminate the Gospel throughout world—especially in places where it had not yet been proclaimed—kept him on the move until he finally reached Spain, at that time the edge of the known world. His mission to the pagans helped him understand the absolute value of Jesus Christ for everyone and the relativity of Jewish rites and customs, which were linked to a specific people. Thus, thanks to Paul, the frontiers of the Church expanded to embrace the entire world—to embrace universality.

FOR DEEPER STUDY

Read Galatians 2:1-20; Acts 15:4-29

Due to the ambiguity of some source material, a number of scholars believe that the Jerusalem Assembly took place after Paul's second missionary trip. But divergence of opinion on the subject does not diminish the importance of the event, which was a fundamental stage in the growth of the early Church. Thanks to Paul, the fledging Church was freed of bonds to the Jewish culture and opened its arms to universality.

In announcing the celebration of a year dedicated to St. Paul, Pope Benedict XVI said: "The Apostle to the Gentiles, who was especially committed to taking the Good News to all peoples, left no stone unturned for unity and harmony among all Christians. May he guide and protect us in this bimillennial celebration, helping us to progress in the humble and sincere search for the full unity of all the members of Christ's Mystical Body. Amen."