

Volume 19

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History's Turning Points: A Series (2)

– The Tentmaker from Tarsus

Lead: Historical study often helps reveal twists in the human journey. We examine history's turning points: the tentmaker from Tarsus.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: He began life in his own words as “a Jew of the Jews.” Paul of Tarsus was a member of the Pharisees, a school of Judaism known for its zeal for orthodoxy. His early encounters with the emerging Jewish sect that would eventually separate into Christianity revealed his zealotry by

going after the growing number of adherents of Jesus who were claiming that the crucified and very dead Nazarene had come back from the dead. Commissioned to attack the followers of Jesus in the city of Damascus, he wrote later that on the way he was felled by a bright light and what he described as the transforming voice of Jesus himself. This son of Judaism switched loyalties and was soon proselytizing alongside, though barely tolerated by, the understandably suspicious original disciples, those who had actually known Jesus. And in this came one of history's turning points.

Paul reportedly struck out on three extended preaching journeys north

and west to the cities of present-day Turkey and southeastern Europe, and began to do something very different. He would go to the local synagogue, present himself as a Pharisaic rabbi, speak of Jesus in the familiar tones of Judaism. Then he would go out into the public square and preach to non-Jews, Gentiles, eventually calibrating a new message, one popular with these non-Jews, that salvation could come without obeying the cultic or moral system of the Jews, but by faith in Christ alone.

In his lifetime, any fair observer would have to admit that Paul was largely a failure and he was almost forgotten. Yet, in the years prior to his martyrdom by the Roman authorities

sometime around 67 CE, he punctuated his travels with a series of brilliant letters to the congregations he founded, to those hoped to visit, or to associates with whom he was close, some deeply philosophical or theological, some intensely personal, in which he gave literary flesh to a system of ideas that helped lay the groundwork for what became Christian doctrine. These were later assembled as a significant part of the Christian canon, the New Testament.

In one of the great historical ironies, the churches he founded or influenced emerged from the collapse of Roman authority in the fifth century as the singular bearer of what became known as Western

Civilization. This preserved along with its spiritual mission the historical memory and the philosophical, political, social and legal legacy of decidedly secular Greek and Roman culture. This is something that would most probably not have occurred if Christianity had not followed his lead, emerged from, and become independent from its traditional Jewish heritage.

At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.

Resources

Boorstin, Daniel J. and Gerald Parshall, “History’s Hidden Turning Points,” *U.S. News and World Report*. 110 (15, April 22, 1991): 52-66.

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