

William Barclay, "A Comparison of Paul's Missionary Preaching and Preaching to the Church," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.165-175.

## CHAPTER X

# *A Comparison of Paul's Missionary Preaching and Preaching to the Church*

**William Barclay**

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Most preachers preach to the home church or to the mission field, but not to both. Generally speaking a preacher will preach either to the converted or the unconverted. He will be either an itinerant missionary with no settled sphere of work, or he will be the pastor of a settled community in one place. But Paul had to play both roles. He was the missionary preacher who preached to men who had never heard the name of Jesus Christ, and he was the pastor who had to deal with all the problems of congregational life. In the New Testament we have specimens of Paul's preaching in both spheres, for in the recorded sermons of Acts we see Paul preaching as a missionary, and in the Letters we see him acting as a pastor. Within the limits of an essay such as this we shall try to look at him in both areas of his work.

### I

First, we look at Paul as a missionary preacher. Two things at once stand out about his missionary preaching.

*i.* He had the gift of beginning where his hearers were. We possess records of three of Paul's missionary sermons. There is the sermon preached in the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41); the sermon preached in Athens (Acts 17:22-31); the sermon preached in Lystra (Acts 14:15-17). We must note here and now — the fact will become very relevant later — that these can be only the briefest notes of what Paul said. The longest of them, as it stands in Acts, the sermon at Antioch in Pisidia, would in its present form take no more than three minutes to deliver. These are not verbatim reports; they are the merest summaries of what was originally said.

The significant fact is that in the three sermons the approach, at least on the surface, is completely different. In Antioch in Pisidia Paul was preaching in a synagogue to Jews, to proselytes and to God-fearers. He therefore began in Jewish history, and used the Old Testament as an arsenal of prooftexts to prove his case. He knew that he could do this for he knew that his audience was steeped in Jewish history and in the scriptures. In Athens he

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began from local religious worship, and he quoted from the Greek poets (Acts 17:28). He never mentions Jewish history and he makes no quotation from the scriptures. He knew that it would be futile to talk about a history which no one knew and to quote from a book which no one had read, and the authority of which no one would accept. In Lystra Paul used still

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another method. In Lystra he was out in the wilds. Certainly no one there would know anything about Jewish history or Jewish scriptures. Lystra had not the widely disseminated culture of Athens, and there was no point in quoting the Greek poets. He therefore started straight from nature, from the sun and the wind and the rain and the growing things. In his missionary approach Paul had no set scheme and formula; his approach was completely flexible. He began where his audience was.

ii. The second thing which stands out very clearly is that for Paul missionary preaching was not a monologue but a dialogue. True, it was proclamation, but it was not take-it-or-leave-it proclamation. It was proclamation plus explanation and defence. The characteristic word of Paul's missionary preaching in the synagogue is the word *argued*. In Damascus, in Thessalonica, in Athens, in Corinth, in Ephesus Paul argued in the synagogue (Acts 9:22; 17:2, 17; 18:4; 19: 8). The faith was proclaimed and defended at the same time. Acceptance of it was not given on a wave of emotion; from the beginning the mind had to be satisfied as well as the heart.

Let us then look at the pattern of Paul's missionary preaching. First, let us look at the sermon preached in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41). It begins with a survey of Jewish history (verses 16-23). It moves on to the immediate preparation for Jesus by John the Baptist (verses 24, 25). It proceeds to the narrative of Jesus' rejection, death and resurrection (verses 26-29). It claims that all these events were foretold in prophecy (verses 23-27), and quotes the appropriate prophecies. It ends with a warning to those who still reject the offer of God in Jesus Christ (verses 40, 41).

Let us now look at the sermon at Athens. The strange thing about it is that, on the face of it, it looks very different, but when we begin to examine it, the pattern is almost exactly the same. It begins with history, only this time the history is not the history of the Jewish people, but the history of the search of the soul for God (Acts 17:23-28). It presents the coming of Jesus Christ as God's decisive event (verse 30). It proclaims the fact of the resurrection and the threat of judgment (verse 31). With the exception of the reference to John the Baptist — who would have been irrelevant to an Athenian audience — the elements of the sermon in Antioch reappear in the sermon at Athens.

The sermon at Lystra (Acts 14:15-17) is so very short that it would seem to have little to contribute, but that is not so. History is still there, for there is stressed the continuing activity of God (verses 15, 17). And, short as it is,

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it reproduces one of the essential ideas of the sermon at Athens. In the sermon at Athens Paul said:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

And in the sermon at Lystra Paul said:

In past generations he (God) allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16).

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This is to say that in both sermons the coming of Jesus Christ is presented as the decisive event of history, and from the brief sermon at Lystra it may well be held that, when it was possible to say very little, this was the one thing that Paul was determined to say.

We are now in a position to reconstruct the main elements in Paul's missionary preaching.

*i.* History is a preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ, whether that history be a series of events in the life of the Jewish nation, or the search for God among the Gentiles.

*ii.* In this time of preparation God was not detached from men, like someone who set a process going and then stood back to watch it. He is not far (Acts 17:27, 28); he was active in the unfolding of history (Acts 13:16-23; 17: 26); he was caring and providing for men in the processes of nature (Acts 14:17).

*iii.* In Jesus Christ God acted decisively. After Jesus' coming life can never be the same again. There has been a confrontation in which God entered the human situation. There has been a revelation of God, which has laid man under a new obligation, and which has confronted him with a situation in which he must accept or reject (Acts 14:16; 17:30).

*iv.* The aim of this confrontation was solely the good of man. It is good news which is brought. It is a message of salvation that the preacher preaches. It is a Saviour whom he proclaims. It is forgiveness and freedom, otherwise unobtainable, which are offered (Acts 13:23, 32, 38, 39).

*v.* In spite of this, this offer was rejected by the Jews. Jesus was treated as a criminal. Pilate was persuaded into ordering his death. He was rejected, crucified and buried (Acts 13:27-29).

*vi.* But this was not the end. The rejection was followed by the resurrection. The resurrection was foretold in the scriptures (Acts 13:34-37), and the apostles were witnesses of it (Acts 13:31) — a double proof that it really happened.

*vii.* The resurrection has given Jesus the right of judgment (Acts 17:31), and men must now beware that they do not bring judgment and destruction upon themselves by rejecting the revelation and the offer of God (Acts 13:34-37, 40, 41).

When we look at this survey of Paul's missionary preaching, one thing

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is bound to strike us. There does not on the surface seem to be in it anything about the actual historical life of Jesus of Nazareth. From this it has been argued that Paul knew little or nothing about the earthly life of Jesus, and that he was indifferent to it. All that mattered to him, so it has been claimed, is the risen Christ. But if we examine this preaching material of Paul more closely, we will find that this is a view which is quite untenable.

Let us go back to the sermon in the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41). In verse 23 the name of Jesus is suddenly introduced. In verses 24 and 25 John the Baptist appears

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equally suddenly on the scene. It is quite incredible that any audience would not ask: "Who is this Jesus? Who is this John?" This is so on quite general grounds. A name has no more meaning than the symbol X unless it is filled out with some information about the person who bears it. A name by itself is meaningless. It must raise a picture of a person or it means nothing at all. Further, on particular grounds, practically every religion in the ancient world had its cult story, in which the candidate was given careful instruction before he could become an initiate. Anyone in the ancient world would expect, if not demand, the cult story. And, if the cult involved, and was even based on, the idea of the incarnation of God, then the cult story becomes a first essential.

These are perfectly general considerations, but when we go further with the sermon (verses 27-31) we come on this passage which is central to the sermon:

For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled those by condemning him. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.

Suppose ourselves to be listening to this for the first time — who and what is Pilate? Here is a name out of the blue. The plain fact about a passage like this is that *it is intelligible to us only because we already know the story*. It is intelligible as a summary of that which is already known; it is not intelligible, at least it is not meaningful, to those who are hearing it for the first time without very considerable expansion. It implies the whole story of the life, the trial and the death of Jesus. It implies the story of the death and of the resurrection of Jesus. Without that, it would be tantalizing rather than appealing. As a summary of that which is known, it is effective; as a statement of that which is unknown, it is merely bewildering.

From this it would seem that it is a fair deduction that in the missionary preaching there must have been instruction in the actual historical life of

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Jesus. There is a phrase in one of Paul's letters which makes this to all intents and purposes certain. In appealing to the Corinthians Paul writes: "I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:1). It is perfectly plain that such an appeal is meaningless unless the Corinthians were aware of actual incidents and events in the life of Jesus in which this meekness and gentleness were demonstrated. This appeal would be totally ineffective unless it was made to people who knew that life in which the meekness and gentleness were clear for all to see. It appears that Paul's whole method of preaching involves a background knowledge of the life of Jesus.

This would also emerge from the basic method of early Christian preaching. The great claim of the Christian preachers, including Paul, was that the proof of Jesus' Messiahship was the fulfilment of prophecy in his life and in the events of his life. That is an argument which is ineffective and indeed unusable, unless there was a record of the events which were claimed

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to be fulfilments. The argument from prophecy implies a knowledge of the events of Jesus' life.

Where did this knowledge come from? There are in the New Testament a body of men who are mentioned high in the lists of Christian workers, but whose precise duties are never described. These were the teachers (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). It would be very natural for the man whose interest had been aroused to be handed over to the teachers for instruction in the story of the life of Jesus. The teachers would be the living books in which the material which became our gospels was contained. It may well have been these teachers who were responsible for the "forms" which lie behind the finished versions of the gospels.

But another interesting possibility arises. When Paul and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey, they took John Mark with them. "They had also John to their minister," as the AV puts it (Acts 13:5). The RSV reproduces the Greek less literally: "And they had John to assist them." The Greek is: εἶχον δὲ καὶ Ἰωάννην ὑπηρέτην. If this means that they had John as their assistant, we should have expected that either ὑπηρέτης would have come at the beginning of the sentence, or that it would have been preceded by ὡς. A long time ago now F. H. Chase in his article on John Mark in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. iii), made the suggestion that ὑπηρέτης was not a description of the work which John Mark was to do with Paul and Barnabas, but that it was a title, that John Mark was John the ὑπηρέτης. What would this mean? It would mean that John Mark was the synagogue official known in Hebrew as the *hazzan*, and in Greek as the ὑπηρέτης and an important part of the duties of that official was that he was the synagogue teacher, responsible for the education of children, and, of course, in Judaism education was education in the faith. F. H. Chase finds some support for this in the fact that in the Acts passage the synagogue is mentioned in the same verse (Acts 13:5). If

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Chase's suggestion could be accepted, it would mean that Paul and Barnabas went out with, so to speak, a teacher on their staff to give the very instruction which is implied. But it is not necessary to accept Chase's suggestion regarding John Mark to hold that the early missionary preaching included instruction in the life of Jesus. That instruction is implied in Paul's preaching by itself.

## II

Let us now turn to Paul's preaching in the church, his preaching to the converted, to those who had already accepted Jesus Christ. This preaching we will find in his letters. Paul's letters are sermons far more than they are theological treatises. It is with immediate situations that they deal. They are sermons even in the sense that they were spoken rather than written. They were not carefully written out by someone sitting at a desk; they were poured out by someone striding up and down a room as he dictated, seeing all the time in his mind's eye the people to whom they were to be sent. Their torrential style, their cataract of thought, their involved sentences all bear the mark of the spoken rather than of the written word.

They have two main aims — to tell men what they must believe and how they must act, now that they are Christians. Their aim is to produce and to preserve right belief and right conduct.

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Their purpose is to preserve in their purity the Christian theology and the Christian ethic. Right belief and right action are the twin subjects of Paul's preaching within the church. That is why Paul's preaching is characteristically corrective and prophylactic. It is designed either to deal with some threatening situation which has arisen, or to take steps to see to it that such a situation does not arise.

Behind Paul's letters there lie three theological dangers, which are permanent threats to the new convert to the faith. In the space at our disposal we can deal with them only in the broadest outline.

*i.* There is the danger of *relapse*. Paul's converts did not have centuries of Christian tradition behind them; they were so short a distance from the life which they had once lived. They did not live in a society permeated by Christian ideals and ideas, even when it has abandoned Christian belief. They were, as it has been put, a little island of Christianity surrounded by a sea of paganism. We can identify two of the relapses into which Paul's converts were liable to fall.

(*a*) There was, for the Jews especially, the relapse into legalism. If a man had been brought up in a faith into the very substance of which were woven rules and regulations and rites and observances, a faith in which life was law and law was life, a religion of faith alone was so new that at times it seemed an impossibility. If a man had been trained to believe that circumcision was the very mark of God, it was very difficult of him to think

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of circumcision as something which was of no importance. The result is that he was always in danger of a relapse into legalism (Gal. 2:16; 3:2-5). The man who all his life has been intent on earning salvation finds it difficult to believe that he must accept salvation. He will be very apt, even, so to speak, for safety's sake, to add the old law to the new faith, and thereby by implication to deny the total adequacy of Jesus Christ.

(*b*) There was the danger of the relapse into astralism. It was an age when men were "servile to all the skyey influences" (S. Angus, *The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World*, p. 254). Men were convinced of the power of the stars to settle their life and destiny. Astrology was "a learned superstition, which up to modern times has exercised over Asia and Europe a wider dominion than any religion has ever achieved" (F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion*, p. xv). S. Angus begins the first of his chapters on Astralism (*op. cit.*, p. 254) by quoting Romans 8:39 in the form: "I am persuaded that neither the ascension of the stars nor their declinations shall be able to separate us from the love of God." It would be very difficult for a first-century man to break away from this background of thought. It is at least possible that it is to this that Paul refers when he says that the Galatians had once been slaves to the elemental spirits (Gal. 4:3), and when he tells the Colossians that with Christ they had died to these same spirits (Col. 2:20). When we remember the influence that astrology has on even the people of the twentieth century, we can understand its pull on the mind of the new converts of the first century.

Paul had to take steps to see that his converts did not relapse into legalism or astralism.

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ii. The second danger was the danger of *syncretism*. Christianity entered the world in an intensely syncretistic age. It had been the avowed aim of Alexander the Great "to marry the East to the West". On the famous occasion at Susa he himself had married Statira, the eastern queen; a hundred of his officers, and ten thousand of his soldiers had married eastern brides (Arrian, *Anabasis* 7:4). The East was being literally married to the West. So the eastern religions came flooding into the West. Men could not believe that there was only one way to so great a goal, or only one possessor of so great a secret. Exclusiveness was something in religion which the ancient world, with the exception of the Jews, could not understand.

Further, there was a way of equating gods and goddesses with corresponding deities in other religions and in other countries. So Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 11:5) hears Isis say:

Parent of nature, mistress of all the elements, the first-born of the ages... whom the Phrygians adore as the Pessinuntian Mother of the gods, the Athenians as Minerva, the Cyprians as Venus, the Cretans as Dictynian Diana, the Sicilians as Proserpina, the Eleusinians as Demeter, others as Juno, or Bellona, others as Hecate or Rhamnusia, while the Egyptians and others honour me with my proper name of Queen Isis.

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In a religious atmosphere like this it was not difficult to get a hearing for the story of Jesus. It was not even difficult to gain for him a place among the many saviour gods. But it was very difficult for people to think of him as the one and only Saviour. The necessary intolerance of Christianity was a difficult concept.

The echoes of this syncretistic controversy sound in the letter to the Colossians, with its insistence that Jesus is the very image of God, that in him there is the fulness of the godhead in bodily form (Col. 1:15-20; 2:9). That whole letter is taken up with the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. He is not one of many; he is the only one. He is not to be identified with anyone else; he is himself. It was impossible to play safe by adding him to the pantheon, so, as it were, not to miss a chance. Commitment to him meant the abandonment of all others.

In a syncretistic age Paul had to defend the uniqueness of Christ.

iii. The third danger was the danger of *the perversion of the faith*. A religion and ethic of legalism will not normally run into the danger of immorality. But there is a certain inherent danger in a religion of grace. A doctrine of grace can be perverted into an excuse, and even a reason, for sinning, and this happened in some of Paul's churches.

It is this perversion of grace which is in the background of Romans 6. That chapter is a kind of summary conversation between Paul and those who wished to misinterpret and misuse the conception of grace. The argument runs somewhat as follows. "So, then," they said to Paul, "you argue that grace is the greatest thing in the world?" "Most certainly," Paul answered. "You also argue that the grace of God is wide enough to forgive and cover every sin?" "Most certainly," Paul answered. "If that is so," they said, "let us go on sinning, for the more we sin, the more chances this wonderful grace of God will have to operate. Sin is a good thing, for the effect of sin is to produce more and more grace." "God will forgive," as Heine said. "It is his trade."

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This is an argument which has emerged again and again in the history of the church, and it is an argument which has unconsciously or consciously affected many a man's life and action. Human nature being such as it is, it is an attractive argument. But in this argument, as Paul points out, two things have been forgotten. First, the obligation of grace has been forgotten. Any gift brings its obligation and the gift of grace does supremely so. Second, it has been forgotten that grace has a future as well as a past reference, that it has not only a forgiving power, but also a transforming power. Truly to experience grace is not only to experience forgiveness for the past, but also transformation for the future. The obligation and the transformation of grace are the answer to the perversion of grace.

So, then, in the protection of right belief Paul had within the church to take steps in his preaching to guard against the dangers of relapse, of syncretism and of perversion of the faith.

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We began the section on Paul's preaching within the church by saying that it had two aims — to preserve right belief and right conduct, to maintain a true theology and a true ethic. We have looked at his preaching as it affects belief; we now turn to look at it as it affects conduct. We may say that Paul's teaching about right conduct falls into two sections — the conduct of the Christian within the church, and the conduct of the Christian outside the church.

First, then, we turn to Paul's ethical demands on those inside the church. They may be summed up under three heads.

(a) There is the demand for *unity*. This comes out most clearly in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12. The discussion emerges from the wrong way in which the Corinthians are treating the Christian common meal. That which should have been an experience and a demonstration of unity had become a thing of cliques and socially separated groups. The Christians should have been the body of Christ, and the body has been disintegrated and dismembered. Not to discern the body (1 Cor. 11: 29) is to eat and drink in an unworthy way, and to lose the blessing of the sacrament. It is to be noted that the correct reading here is not, "not discerning the Lord's body," but, "not discerning the body." And the meaning is that, unless Christians discern their unity in Christ, they are not fit to approach the Lord's Table at all. Christians are a body; more, they are the body of Christ, and not to discern that unity is the most serious of sins.

(b) Closely allied with this is the demand that this unity must issue in *cooperation in service* (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:27-30). Whatever gift a man has, he has received from God, and he must use it in the service of God and in the service of man. One man's gift will not be another man's gift. A man must accept himself as he is, and consent to use himself, and to be used. Only thus will the body of which he is a part function correctly.

(c) The third demand is also a closely allied demand; it is the demand for the awareness of *mutual responsibility*. This emerges most clearly in that enterprise which was most dear to the heart of Paul, the collection for the church at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8 and 9). Here was a visible demonstration of the responsibility of the comfortable for the poor, of the Gentile for the Jew, of the new-comer for the veteran. Congregationalism in the narrower sense of the term was far from the mind of Paul. For him, not only the congregation, but also the whole church was one body, no part of which dare neglect the need of any other part.



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The conception of the church as the body of Christ, the demand for unity, the demand for awareness of mutual responsibility, the demand for cooperation in service are for Paul the basis of right living within the church.

Second, we turn to Paul's demand for right living on the Christian in his life outside the church.

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In every area of life the demand is the demand for *holiness*, but it is important to see what this holiness means and implies. The standard title for the Christians is "the saints" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1). The word is *hagios*, of which the basic meaning is *different*. That which is *hagios* is different. The temple was *hagios* because it was different from other buildings; the Bible is *hagios* because it is different from other books; God is *hagios* supremely because he is "the wholly other". So, then, the first demand, and the basic demand, is the demand for difference. But it has always to be remembered that that difference is to be expressed and worked out, not by withdrawal from the world, but by involvement in the world. Again and again it is the demand of Paul that the Christian should have a chastity and a charity and an honesty which are not to be found in the world in which he lived. Transformation not conformation, was the Pauline watchword (Rom. 12:2). There are few more difficult demands that can be made upon a man than the demand to be different, but this was Paul's basic demand on the Christian within the world.

We now turn to Paul's ethical teaching to the Christian in his life outside the church. Here there are three main areas, and we may take Paul's teaching regarding two of them together, because the principles are the same in both areas. These two areas are the family and work (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1). In these two areas three things may be said about Paul's ethical demand.

(a) In each case the ethic which Paul teaches and preaches is what can only be called a reciprocal ethic. That is to say, he never lays down a claim without at the same time laying down a duty. So the husband must receive the obedience and the respect of the wife, but he must give his love and care and consideration to the wife. The child must give the parent obedience and respect, but the parent must treat the child in such a way that the child will not be depressed and discouraged. The servant must give the master his best work, but the master must give the servant just and generous treatment. Always a privilege brings a responsibility. Always to have a claim on a person is to have that person have claim on us. Reciprocity is the key-word to this ethic of family and industry.

(b) Always Paul's ethical teaching is based on the recognition and acceptance of just and legitimate authority. It is built into the human situation that the husband exercises authority over the wife, the parent over the child, and the master over the workman. Paul sees life in terms of what might be called natural authorities. But it must be remembered that that authority gives no right to dominate and to tyrannize. It is, as we have seen, an authority the obverse of which is duty.

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(c) It is always to be remembered that there is an eschatological element in the ethic which Paul teaches. The master must remember that he has a Master. All alike must do everything as if it were done for Christ. And at the end of the day there is judgment for every man (Rom. 14:10;

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2 Cor. 5:10). There is a sanction which is more than an earthly sanction. There is destiny as well as there is life.

The third area on which Paul has instruction to give to his converts is with regard to the state (Rom. 13:1-7). Here again there enters into the matter the idea of subjection to a just and lawful and even divine authority. Paul makes it clear that Christianity and good citizenship go together. Only the bad man has any reason to fear the just magistrate.

There is one other thing which not only Paul but the whole New Testament preaches in regard to the duty of the Christian outside the church. Again and again it is laid down that the best propaganda for Christianity and the best sermon is the witness and the evidence of a Christian life (Col. 4:5, 6).

Paul's preaching to those outside the church was for commitment in faith to Jesus Christ, and his preaching inside the church was designed to maintain right belief and right action, which are the sign and the proof of that commitment.

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