

Obedience to His Heavenly Vision

When he stood trial before King Agrippa, the apostle Paul declared, "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). What Paul said next is striking because it reveals that *his own thinking* about what was central for him to do in obedience to his heavenly vision was *more than* what many believers today might initially think that it was. His first statement about his obedience was not a statement explicitly about his proclaiming Christ. In fact, Paul's *first words* in explaining his obedience do not say anything at all explicitly about his ministering to people content about Jesus. (Of course, proclaiming Christ *was* a key aspect of Paul's obedience, as his later statements make clear [26:22-23]). Instead, Paul said that he "**showed** first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, **that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance**" (Acts 26:20).

In this very important statement concerning *Pauline* evangelism, Paul himself highlighted his universal proclamation of repentance toward God in multiple ways.

First, he said that he ministered that emphasis first in Damascus. Paul had been saved on the road to Damascus and first ministered as a servant of Christ in Damascus. Comparing what Paul says here with what Luke records in Acts 9 instructs us about some important points in interpreting the book of Acts properly. In Damascus, shortly after his salvation, Paul "straightway preached Christ in the synagogues that He is the Son of God" (9:20). Luke adds that Paul was "proving that this is very Christ" (9:22) and that Barnabas later testified to the apostles that Paul had "preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus" (9:27). Luke does not record in Acts 9 anything about Paul's proclamation of repentance toward God.

If we were to go only with what we are told by Luke in Acts 9, we would have no idea that Paul emphatically preached concerning repentance toward God in Damascus. Conversely, if we do not account for Acts 9 in our handling of Acts 26:20, we would not know that Paul preached in Damascus that Jesus was the Son of God. Because God has chosen to give us both accounts, we are obligated to consider both in formulating our understanding of what was essential in Pauline evangelism.

Second, Paul's first statement concerning his obedience to his heavenly vision further stresses his proclamation of repentance by showing that he continued ministering in that manner throughout the rest of his life to all people everywhere. Paul said that he proclaimed repentance in Damascus, Jerusalem, all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles. He thus communicated *the chronological, geographical, and ethnic comprehensiveness of his preaching repentance toward God*. No other statement in Scripture concerning his evangelistic ministry matches the multifaceted comprehensive scope of Paul's own testimony in this statement.

In agreement with the preceding discussion of Acts 9, the comparison of another account of Pauline evangelistic ministry with Acts 26:20 also shows the same importance of Acts 26:20. Acts 17:1-9 does not mention Paul's preaching of repentance in Thessalonica. Paul's own statement about the results of that ministry ("turned to God," 1 Thess. 1:9) compared with Acts 26:20 ("repent and turn to God"), however, strongly implies that he did challenge the Thessalonians to repent and turn to God.

These comparisons of supplementary accounts of Paul's ministry support our holding that God wants us to understand that Pauline preaching of Christ characteristically included the proclamation of repentance toward God — whether or not the biblical record of a particular evangelistic occasion says anything about such proclamation. This comparison also strongly suggests that summary statements about the ministry of the other apostles that lack mention of the proclamation of repentance are not to be taken as evidence that they did not preach repentance in those messages.

Third, Paul's first statement concerning his obedience to his heavenly vision further stresses his proclamation of repentance by expanding on what that proclamation included. Paul specified that he showed from "Damascus . . . to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God, and **do works meet for repentance**." What did Paul mean when he said, "Do works meet for repentance"? Because these words are included in this key statement, we need to attempt to understand what they signify. Comparing Scripture (26:20) with Scripture (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38-41; 8:12; 36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 13:24; 16:33-34; 19:4-5; 22:16) strongly suggests that **the works fitting for repentance surely included baptism**. The Gentecost accounts are especially strong in showing that baptism is what is to be done after salvation to demonstrate the genuineness of one's belief (15:7-9) and repentance (11:18); in fact, Peter *commanded* Cornelius and the others who were saved to be baptized (10:48).

Because Paul directed everyone to do works (plural), what else did he have in mind besides baptism? Acts 19:18-19 suggests that Paul also had in mind **a discernible change of life that includes open abandonment of past evil practices as proof of repentance**: "And many that believed came, and confessed, and showed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver."

Furthermore, the parallel of this passage with the records of John the Baptist's proclamation of repentance (Matt. 3:6; Luke 3:2-18) support this interpretation. John's demand that the multitude "bring forth . . . fruits worthy of repentance" ([ποιήσατε . . . καρπὸς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας], Luke 3:8) is especially strong in that regard because it closely parallels Paul's statement, "do works meet for repentance" ([ἄξια τῆς μετανοίας ἔργα πράσσοντας] Acts 26:20).

Acts 19:26-27 also seems to confirm this interpretation through its testimony about the effect that Paul's ministry had, not only in Ephesus, but also almost throughout all Asia (notice the wide geographical scope of this statement about Paul's ministry): "This Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship[s]."

Fourth, how do we account for Paul's having this singular emphasis on proclaiming repentance from the beginning of his ministry life? Examining the multiple accounts related to Paul's conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26; 1 Tim. 1), we do not find any statements that provide explicit help in explaining this emphasis. Acts 26:18 conceptually relates to a turning of people but does not say per se that Jesus commissioned Paul to proclaim repentance.

It is amazing that we are not given more information about how Paul came to have this key component of his mindset about what obedience to his heavenly vision involved. We, therefore, can only speculate that Jesus either gave him this directive personally or through Ananias instructed him about what he was to do. We have no *specific* information to support either possibility. This lack of information suggests that we should not view any records of apostolic commissioning as exhaustive.

This examination of Paul's testimony concerning his heavenly obedience shows us that **Paul greatly emphasized the importance of his proclaiming repentance to everyone everywhere throughout his ministerial life** (cf. "all men every where," Acts 17:30). Pauline evangelistic ministry, therefore, is only understood properly when this crucial statement is accounted for concerning what was prominent in his mind. Like Paul, in obedience to Christ (Lk. 24:47), we must proclaim repentance and turning to God to everyone everywhere and insist that they perform works fitting for repentance.