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**CONVICTION, CONVERSION AND COMMITMENT :  
A STUDY ON THE RELIGIOUS PERSONALITY  
OF ST. PAUL**

“I was circumcised when I was a week old. I am an Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure-blooded Hebrew. As far as keeping the Jewish Law is concerned, I was a Pharisee, and I was so zealous that I persecuted the Church. As far as a person can be righteous by obeying the commands of the Law, I was without fault. But all those things that I might count as profit, I now reckon as loss for Christ’s sake. Not only those things; I reckon everything as complete loss for the sake of what is so much more valuable, the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere refuse, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him. ....All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life” (Phil 3 : 5-11).

It is in these words that Paul, one of the greatest thinkers and theologians of the early Church, articulated his commitment to Christ after he had been the zealous follower of Judaism, its Law and its practices. What is aimed at in this study is to highlight some of the specific characteristics of his religiosity which constituted the authenticity of his personality and made him the great religious man and theologian the early Church ever produced. This study will also help, it is hoped, to specify the profound implications of his religious commitment which resulted in making Christianity what it is today. But for him Christianity should have been an entirely different reality, almost identified with the Judaism of the first century. It was Paul who stood firm in defining the inner reality of Christianity and making it a new movement transcending the narrow confines of Judaism and its ideologies.

### A Blameless Pharisee

We do not know much about the background of Paul. What little is known about him comes to us from two biblical sources, namely, from his letters,<sup>1</sup> and from the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>2</sup> These details, together with extra-biblically controlled events help us to outline the sketch of Paul's life and activities.

Born around AD 10 in the Hellenistic town of Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:30), Paul traced his descent back to the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5). From birth he enjoyed the status of a Roman citizen (Acts 22; 25-29; 16:37; 23:27). The Hellenistic environment of Tarsus and the Jewish heritage of his family left their marks on the personality and character of Paul. In fact, Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, was known as a centre of culture, philosophy and education. It had schools which surpassed those of Athens and of Alexandria. The students were mainly native of Cilicia, and not foreigners, as was the case in Athens and Alexandria. Philosophers and politicians visited Tarsus because of its importance. Paul must have received some of his early education in this city and hence we understand his boast that he was a "citizen of no mean town" (Acts 21:39).

At the same time, Paul boasted of being a 'Jew' (Acts 21:39, 22:3), an 'Isrealite' (2 Cor 11:22; Rom 11:10), a "Hebrew born of Hebrews... and as to the law a Pharisee" (Phil 3:6; cf. Acts 23:6). "I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest party of our religion" (Acts 26:5; Gal 1:14), Paul says. After his early education in Tarsus, Paul was sent to Jerusalem where he was "educated at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). This refers to Rabbi Gamaliel I, the Elder, who had a school in Jerusalem between AD 20 and 50. There he must have learned Hebrew and Aramaic (cf Acts 21:40; 26:14). Through his training in the school of Gamaliel Paul was preparing to be a rabbi. From what we know about the role Paul played in the early church, we would say that he never was satisfied with being an average person. Moreover, he was a man of profound convictions and lived by and for his convictions, which had tremendous consequences for his early life in Judaism.

According to J. Jeremias, Paul was at his conversion not merely a disciple of a rabbi, but a recognized teacher with the right to make legal decisions. This status is presupposed in the role he played in going to

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1. Cf. Gal 1:15-23; 2:1-14; Phil 3:5-10; 4:16; 1 Cor 7:7; 16:5-8; 2 Cor 2:1; 9-13; 11:32-33; 12:2-4, 14,21; 13:1,10; Rom 11:1; 15:22-28.
  2. Cf. Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1-30; 11:25-30; 12:25; 13:1-28:31.

Damascus to arrest the followers of Jesus (Acts 9:1-2; 22:5; 26:12). Such authority would only be given to someone qualified and reliable. He decided that he should do everything against the cause of Jesus of Nazareth, because as a teacher of the Law he was convinced that "anyone who is hanged on a tree was under God's curse" (Dt 21:23). It was this Jesus whom his followers had started accepting as Messiah and adoring as the Lord. Consequently when they were sentenced to death, he voted against them (Acts 26:10). He received authority from the chief priests to have the Christians punished and he tried to make them deny their faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

When a new threat arose against Judaism in the person Stephen, Paul was there to associate himself with those who punished him. His role in the stoning of Stephen to death is referred to in the statement that those who stoned him piled their garments at the feet of Paul (Acts 7:58), because he approved the action (Acts 22:20). It could be that Paul did not want to be one among those who stoned him, because that must have been too mean an exercise of his status as a Jewish rabbi. All the same he was a party to the martyrdom of Stephen.

### The Damascus Experience

It was around 36 AD that Paul went to Damascus with official letters of introduction to the Synagogues there, so that if he should find there any followers of the Way of the Lord, he should be able to arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem (cf Acts 9:1-2). But what he experienced on the way changed him completely. Paul himself and Luke in the Acts of the Apostles both describe the experience on the road to Damascus as the turning point of his career. It was an encounter with the Risen Lord that made Paul adopt a new way of life. It was this experience that turned Paul the Pharisee into Paul the apostle.<sup>3</sup>

Paul gives an account of the event in Gal 1:13-17 and three other accounts are given in Acts, all of which stress the overwhelming and unexpected character of the experience, which came in the midst of his persecution of the Christians. There are variants about certain details in the three accounts; but the essential message conveyed by these narratives is the same. All three accounts agree on this: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" - "Who are you, Lord?" - "I am Jesus whom you are

3. Darby, J.H., "The Conversion of a Pharisee," *Scripture* 6 (1953) 3-8; Stanley, D.M., "Paul's Conversion in Acts: Why three accounts" *CBQ* 15 (1953) 315-338. The three accounts are: Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18.

persecuting". Paul himself wrote about this experience that God had been pleased to reveal his Son to him so that he might preach the good news of him to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16). It was an experience that he never forgot, and to which he always associated his apostolic commission and commitment. That revelation of Jesus the Lord on the road to Damascus proved to be the decisive factor dominating the rest of his life. For the sake of Christ he "became all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:22).

New Testament scholars are today less prone than those of former generations to look on the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus as a 'conversion' to be psychologically explained in terms of Paul's Jewish background. Paul himself speaks of that experience as a revelation of the Son accorded him by the Father (Gal 1:16). He compared that experience to God's creation of light: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). It was an event that not only turned Paul the Pharisee into an apostle but also made him the first theologian. The Damascus experience illumined in a creative act Paul's mind and gave him an extraordinary insight into what he later called "the mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:4)

It was on the road to Damascus that Paul understood the soteriological value of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a Jew, Paul certainly knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, had been "hung on a tree" and hence had been "cursed" in the sense of Dt 21:23. This was undoubtedly the main reason why he as a Pharisee could not accept Jesus as the Messiah. He was, for Paul, a "stumbling block" (1: Cor 1:23), one 'cursed' by the very law which he so zealously observed (Gal 3:13; Phil 3:5-6). But the revelation near Damascus impressed him emphatically with the soteriological value of the death of Jesus of Nazareth in a way that he never suspected before. With a logic that only a rabbi could appreciate, Paul saw Christ Jesus taking upon himself the curse of the Law and transforming it into its opposite, so that he became a means of freeing men from its malediction. The cross, which had been the stumbling block to the Jews, became for him the "power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:18-25).

After his conversion Paul went to Arabia (Gal 1:17), probably a Nabatean kingdom in Transjordan. The purpose of his withdrawal is unknown; for some, Paul withdrew in solitude and meditation to prepare himself for his future ministry, for others, he journeyed in pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, to the mountain of the Law, before he could declare

it abrogated ; for still others, he preached Christ in Arabia. In any case, his sojourn was short, and this is probably the reason why Luke omits it. After his return from Arabia in AD 37, Paul spent about three years in Damascus (cf. Gal 1 : 38; Acts 9 : 23), preaching the gospel and establishing that Jesus was the Messiah. But Jewish opposition, supported by King Aretas (2 Cor 11 : 32), made Paul leave the city. His flight was arranged by his disciples, who lowered him over the city wall in a basket (Acts 9:25).

Reaching Jerusalem, for the first time after his conversion (Acts 9 : 26; Gal 1 : 18) around AD 40, Paul had to face the suspicion of the believers there. Barnabas was there to allay the fear of the Christians about Paul (Acts 9 : 27; Gal 1:18) and Paul was finally accepted by them. The purpose of this visit according to Gal 1 : 18 was to obtain information from Cephas about preaching the Gospel. It was during this visit that Paul had a vision while praying in the Temple, that he should leave Jerusalem and get ready to go to the Gentiles (Acts 22 : 17-21). When the Greek speaking Jews tried to kill him, the believers took Paul to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus (Acts 3:30; Gal 1:21). Once Paul set from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute the Christians, now he is being persecuted by his former brethren, the Greek-speaking Jews, and he had to quit Jerusalem !!

It is probable that Paul remained at Tarsus from AD 40 to 44, though nothing is known of his activities during this period. It may have been another period of intense reflection on his whole life and mission. It may have been during this time of recollection that Paul had the vision referred to in 2 Cor 12 : 2-4, a vision in which he heard things that human lips may not speak. At the end of his stay in Tarsus Barnabas took him to Antioch, where he stayed for a year and preached the Gospel (cf. Acts 11 : 25-28). Later Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem taking a collection with them organized by the Christians of Antioch, to face the famine that threatened the poor Christians of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 11 : 29-30). After this short visit Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. It was around AD 46.

### **Committed to the Cause of Christ**

The most active and committed period of Paul's life took place between AD 46 and 58, a time when he preached the gospel in Asia Minor and Greece. The Acts of the Apostles recounts three missionary journeys of

Paul<sup>4</sup> which are very much abbreviated accounts, confined to the essentials. According to Acts 13:1-2 it was the Holy Spirit who inaugurated this mission, while the community fasted, prayed and sent Barnabas, Paul and John Mark, the relative of Barnabas (Col 4:10), to the far off missions.

Though Barnabas was the leader of this group, the events which followed reveal clearly that Paul emerged as the important person for the preaching of the gospel. They first of all preached the gospel to the Jews in the Synagogues, and when they were openly resisted by the Jews, they decided to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 14:48-50). Consequently many Gentiles were converted, which became a crucial problem for the nascent Church. It was a question of the relation of Gentile Christians to the older Jewish converts. Were the Gentile converts to be circumcised? Were they to observe the Mosaic Law? Were they to follow the Pharisaic prescriptions in dietary matters?

It is precisely from this time onwards that we see the strong and committed position taken by Paul in matters related to the essence of Christianity. Gal 2:1-10 explains how he went to Jerusalem with Barnabas and explained to the leaders there the gospel he preached to the Gentiles. Some Christians, pretending to be fellow-believers, slipped into their group as spies and wanted to dissuade Paul from the position he had taken regarding the admission of the Gentiles into the Church. But Paul did not give in to them for a minute, in order to keep the truth of the gospel safe (cf. Gal 2:4-5). Paul succeeded in convincing the leaders in the Jerusalem Church that to be a Christian it was not necessary to undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision. The leaders, however, made use of the opportunity to request Paul to help the poor Christians in their group, as he worked among the rich Gentile Christians, and Paul was only happy to do it (Gal 2:10).

Though the problem of the admission of the Gentiles to the Church was theoretically solved in the "Jerusalem Council" held around AD 49, there were many more problems coming up in which Paul had to take a lead and prove his courageous stand. One of them was the "Antioch Incident", as it is called, and it happened after the Jerusalem Council (cf. Gal 2:11-14). Some Christians from Jerusalem with strong Pharisaic leanings went to Antioch and they started criticising Peter, who was there at that time, for eating with Gentile Christians. Peter yielded to their criticism and drew

4. First Missionary journey Acts 13:3-14:26 (AD 46-49); Second Missionary Journey, Acts 15:40-18:22; (AD 49-52); Third Missionary Journey, Acts 18:22-21:17; (AD 54-57).

back from the Gentile converts and this action of Peter led many other Jewish Christians, even Barnabas, to do the same. Since Peter was their recognized leader, Paul found it necessary to protest and correct Peter, and so he "opposed him to his face" (Gal 2:11). He told Peter that he was violating the accepted principles of the Jerusalem Council and was not "walking straight according to the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2 : 13).

It is probable that Paul decided to take up his second missionary journey soon after this event. Though Paul wanted Barnabas to accompany him, the plan had to be dropped when it was clear that Barnabas was not so much of a committed person. For he wanted to take John Mark with them, who had proved to be an uncommitted person during the first missionary journey. The second and third missionary journeys (AD 49-57) of Paul were characterized by his radical and strong commitment to the cause he had taken upon himself. When he was opposed and persecuted by the Jews in northern Greece, he went to Athens (Acts 17:15). His academic training at Tarsus might have prompted him to present the gospel in the Greek way (Acts 17:22-31); but the result of it was that it was a failure. After this disappointment Paul moved on to Corinth, which was one of the most important commercial centres in the Mediterranean world. It was, indeed, a risk he took because he knew that Corinth was not any ideal town to keep a good Christian community. He refers to his anxiety and fear as he preached to Corinthians and says: "I made up my mind to forget everything except Jesus Christ and especially his death on the Cross" (1 Cor 2:2).

During his third missionary journey, when he spent more than two years in Ephesus (Acts 19 : 10), Paul was informed about a new problem in the Churches of Galatia, which he had founded during his second missionary journey (Acts 16 : 6). Certain Judaizing teachers had infiltrated the churches of Galatia, declaring that in addition to having faith in Jesus Christ, a Christian was obligated to keep the Mosaic Law as well. To Paul it was a 'different gospel', a 'false gospel', a doctrine contrary to the one which was accepted in the Jerusalem Council. This was a serious matter for Paul. He maintained that a man becomes acceptable to God only by faith in Christ and not by the performance of works. Often called the Magna Carta of Christian freedom, the Letter to the Galatians deals with this problem and Paul explains how a Christian must enjoy his freedom in Christ, a freedom which he started enjoying after he had been a slave of the Law.

### **Commitment and Creative suffering**

The new commitment of Paul to the cause of Christ and his gospel demanded from his part a series of sufferings and hardships which, however, enabled him to get rooted in his commitment and emerge as the most authentic and dynamic Christian theologian the early Church ever produced. It was not anything easy for him to leave behind his glorious past as a perfect Pharisee, educated in the school of Gamaliel. More than that, it was not at all easy to abandon his basic convictions about the law and his religion, which together prompted him to become a persecutor of the Christians. But once he was convinced that he was wrong, he was ready to abandon his past and face the challenge of a new life.

But his new mission was not easy and smooth in the early church. He was suspected both by his friends and enemies. The very zeal with which he persecuted the Christians, he now began to show in preaching Jesus as the Messiah. Realizing the need of interiorizing the meaning of what he preached, he retired to Arabia for some time after which he once again preached in Damascus. Faced with the opposition from his Jewish brethren, Paul had to be sent to Jerusalem (Acts 9:23-25) where again he came under suspicion: "They would not believe that he was a disciple, and they were all afraid of him" (Acts 9:26). As one deeply committed to Christ, he never stopped his preaching. Luke summarizes his ministry in Jerusalem: "He went all over Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:28). But his ministry in Jerusalem came to a close because of the opposition of Hellenistic Jews and this resulted in a retirement of Paul to Tarsus for about four years. When Paul was brought to Antioch by Barnabas, he is named as the last of all (Acts 13:1-2). In the great mission from Antioch Paul was only second to Barnabas.

When Paul embraced Christianity and became a follower of Jesus, he was under the impression that the church, of which he became a member, would be a community characterized by a new outlook on Judaism and its practices. But it was not so. The Christian community of Jerusalem was a very sectarian one with its own vision almost restricted to the beliefs and practices of Judaism. They had understood Christianity as another sect of the Sadducees (cf. Acts 5:17), the only difference being that they had accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. For Paul this was not true. According to him Christianity is something transcending Judaism, because the very manner in which Jesus of Nazareth accomplished his salvific work



was against the principles of salvation maintained by Judaism. The continuous controversy and discussion Paul had to carry on in Antioch and Jerusalem and the crises he had to face in the churches he had founded were all characterised by this basic misunderstanding of Christianity and the work of Christ for humanity. But for Paul Christianity should have remained a sect of Judaism and Paul had to fight hard and suffer very much to define the identity and the nature of Christianity.

Once Paul realized that Jesus of Nazareth is alive and that he is one with the believers, an experience he got in the Damascus event, Paul was ready to give up everything he had. But when he started preaching to the Jews, they were not at all willing to accept this gospel. Moreover, they tried to persecute him, an experience he had in Damascus, in Jerusalem and later in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9). In the Letter to the Thessalonians Paul had to refer to this bitter experience (1 Thes 2:14-16). However, it remained a source of pain and agony for Paul that his Jewish brethren were not willing to believe in Jesus. It was in the Letter to the Romans that Paul gave a detailed analysis of the problem of the Jews who did not believe (cf. Rom 9-11). His words of profound feelings about the Jews: "I am speaking the truth; I belong to Christ and I do not lie. My conscience, ruled by the Holy Spirit, also assures me that I am not lying, when I say how great is my sorrow, how endless the pain in my heart for my people, my own flesh and blood! For their sake I could wish that I myself were under God's curse and separated from Christ." (Rom 9:1-3).

The greatest sorrow Paul had to undergo during his apostolic career was from the community of Corinth. As explained above, his preaching to the Corinthians was an experiment and risk in so far as it was not the ideal place to go and preach a gospel of right living. Disappointed by the Athenian adventure of preaching the gospel in a rather philosophical manner to an erudite group, Paul changed the whole approach and gave a new thrust to his preaching by confronting the average and the ordinary, who from their ethical standpoint were below average. That could be the reason why Paul remained with the Corinthians for 18 months, precisely to guide them in the new way of life. But the more Paul took interest in them and tried to bring them up to Christian maturity, the more he had to suffer from them on various grounds.

The Corinthian community is the only one to which Paul wrote several letters.<sup>5</sup> Doubts, factions, scandals, opposition to Paul and questioning his authority, all formed the general situation of the Corinthian church. As years passed by, Paul's relations with the faction-torn Church of Corinth worsened. Paul paid a hasty visit to Corinth (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1-2), which he called a "painful visit" (2 Cor 12:21) and it accomplished nothing. Returning to Ephesus Paul wrote another Letter to the Corinthians, a letter composed "with many tears" (2 Cor 2:3-4, 9; 7:8, 12; 10:1, 9), after which he sent Titus to visit the Corinthians in an attempt to smooth out the situation. Later when Titus brought him the consoling news that a reconciliation between him and Corinthians had been effected, from Macedonia Paul wrote a fourth letter - known as the 2 Corinthians - a letter in which Paul analysed the various aspects of his personality as an apostle and disciple of Christ.

"Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more toward you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (2 Cor 1:12); it is in these words that Paul qualified the nature of his relationship to the Corinthian community. Hence he was ready to undergo the many sufferings, both mental and physical, for the cause he had taken up to preach the gospel. He writes: "God in his mercy has given us this work to do, and so we are not discouraged. We put aside all secret and shameful deeds; we do not act with deceit, nor do we falsify the word of God. In the full light of truth we live in God's sight and try to commend ourselves to everybody's good conscience" (2 Cor 4:1-2).

In religion and in politics there are many committed people. But very often their commitment is not matched by their integrity. As a result, sooner or later, the hollowness and superficiality of their zeal and enthusiasm come to light. Only if a person is ready to suffer for his cause, only if one can claim to be governed by the testimony of his conscience, only if one can address himself to the good conscience of others, can we say that he is a committed person. And Paul was such a person. In the same way as Jesus was committed to his cause and was ready to suffer for it, so, too, Paul dedicated himself to the cause of Christ and suffered for it. In fact, it was through this suffering that his commitment became deeper and personal. Paul

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5. It is probable that Paul wrote at least four letters to the Corinthians, of which we possess the second and the fourth, the others being referred to in 1 Cor 5:9, and 2 Cor 2:3-4.

gives a partial list of the sufferings he had to undergo: "Five times I was given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent twenty-four hours in water. In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow-Jews and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends. There have been work and toil; often I have been without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing. And not to mention other things, every day I am under the pressure of my concern for all the churches. When someone is weak, then I feel weak too; when someone is led into sin, I am filled with distress" (2 Cor 11 : 24-29). Only a committed and sincere person can write like this and prove beyond doubt that his words are trustworthy. He never complained about his sufferings; he could squarely face them. That is why he could write: "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4 : 8-10). For Paul it was a question of his outer nature wasting away so that his inner nature could be renewed everyday (cf. 2 Cor 4:16).

Consequently, Paul's attitude to suffering was not one of resignation. He knew well that he has a task to take care of. To the Philippians he wrote from the prison: "My deep desire and hope is that I still never fail in my duty, but that at all times, and especially just now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being I shall bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die. For what is life? To me, it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more. But if by continuing to live I can do more worthwhile work, then I am not sure, which I should choose. I am pulled in two directions. I want very much to leave this life and be with Christ, which is a far better thing; but for your sake it is much more important that I remain alive" (Phil 1 : 20-24). This conscious and creative approach to hardships and sufferings enabled Paul to make his commitment deeper and his service to the communities more personal. That is why he could write to the Colossians: "Now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the Church" (Col 1 : 24).

#### **"I Know in whom I have trusted" (1 Tim 1 : 12)**

The commitment which Paul made to Christ on the road to Damascus

remained the driving force for him throughout his apostolic career. His life as a preacher of the gospel in Asia Minor and Greece was concluded with his stay in Corinth in AD 57 wherefrom he made plans for his future activities (cf. Acts 20 : 2-3; 1 Cor 16 : 5-6). Though he was basically a preacher of the gospel and a theologian, he was also committed to helping the poor, for which he had taken up a collection in the churches of Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia (1 Cor 16 : 1; Rom 15 : 25-26). He planned to take it to Jerusalem and thus terminate his evangelization of the eastern Mediterranean world. He intended to visit Rome afterward (Rom 15 : 22-24) and from there to go to Spain and the West.

During his visit to Jerusalem while he was performing some religious rites in the Temple, his bitter enemies, the Jewish Christians accused him of having defiled the sanctity of the Temple and they set upon him, dragged him from the Temple and tried to kill him. He was saved, however, by the tribune of the Roman cohort stationed in the Fortress Antonia. The accounts of the story that followed as narrated by Luke clearly reveal the cost Paul had to pay for his new commitment. On the one hand the narrative explains the series of trials Paul had to face; but on the other hand it shows how it had been designed for Paul to bring the Gospel to Rome. The last part of the Acts narrates the arrival of Paul in Rome, where he was kept under house arrest; but he was free to preach the gospel to all who went to him (Acts 28 : 30-31).

Though the Acts of the Apostles was written after Paul had been martyred, the author takes care not to mention it, because, for him, Paul's arrival in Rome, the capital of the civilized world of the time, and his preaching the gospel there is of vital significance. It is true the gospel was preached in Rome long before Paul reached there; but his preaching in Rome forms the climax of the mission he had received from Christ (Acts 9 : 15-16). Though he himself was under house arrest, the gospel he had to preach was free. Paul writes : "Because I preach the gospel, I suffer and I am even chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not in chains" (2 Tim 2 : 9). Paul's preaching the gospel with dedication and commitment to all who went to him is the climactic statement of the Acts and it is in this way that the author shows the positive meaning of Paul's conversion after he had been a persecutor of the Christians and an enemy of the gospel of Christ.

For Paul religious commitment was always total and radical, because it was the result of his profound convictions. As a Jew he was committed to his religion on the basis of the Law of Moses, which for him, was the criterion and norm of his religiosity. As part of that commitment he persecuted the Christians. But when he was confronted by the very person, who he thought had been cursed on account of his being crucified, he realized the need of a new commitment centred on a person who became the norm and criterion of his life. For him Christ became the controlling power of all his actions. He could face everything in life on account of Christ. So he could write to the Corinthians. "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). The paradox a man faces in his encounter with God is that he is more secure and safe, when he is aware of his weakness and limitations. This is what Jesus meant when he invited the poor in spirit to enter the kingdom of God (Mt 5:3). This is what he categorically established in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican by affirming that the latter, in spite of his sins and limitations, went back home accepted by God (Lk 18:9-14).

What we read in the second Letter to Timothy as written by Paul is a fitting conclusion of what Paul could say at the end of his life, characterized by his total commitment to the person and cause of Christ. "As for me, the hour has come for me to be sacrificed; the time is here for me to leave this life. I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept my faith. And now there is waiting for me the prize of victory awarded for a righteous life, the prize which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day." (2 Tim 4:6-8). That is why he could also say: "I am still full of confidence, because I know in whom I have trusted, and I am sure that he is able to keep safe until that Day what he has entrusted to me" (2 Tim 1:12).