

## **A Comparative Analysis of the Apostle Paul's Pre-Conversion and Post-Conversion Approach to Church Discipline**

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Saul (from here on referred to by his Greek name, Paul) was a first-century Pharisee.<sup>1,2</sup> According to the biblical narrative, he had an encounter with the risen Christ resulting in his conversion to Christianity after which he started several churches.<sup>3</sup> A comparative analysis of Pharisaic religious disciplinary practices with Paul's own disciplinary teachings to the New Testament church will reveal whether Paul's Pharisaic background affected how the apostle dealt with disciplinary issues as well as whether they aligned or differed from Christ's teachings on the subject.

Roland Deines, a Professor of New Testament at the University of Nottingham, describes the Pharisaical influence in the first century: "The available textual evidence mentions the Pharisees as a new group gaining influence at that time who, together with their scribes, taught the people of Israel how to live a life that pleases God."<sup>4</sup> Pharisees were also members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body in Jerusalem regarding religious and political matters, and this often included addressing disciplinary issues. The Bible has multiple examples of Jews being brought before the Sanhedrin for matters resulting in discipline<sup>5</sup> and even Paul himself was brought before them in Acts, chapter twenty-one. Deines goes on to give an example of how the Pharisees changed the Levitical requirement of clay pots that were unclean and had to be destroyed in Leviticus 11:33, to treating the outside of the pot clean, thereby saving Jews from needing so

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references will be from the ESV Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:6.

<sup>3</sup> Acts, Chapter 9.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Deines, "Biblical Views: the Pharisees-Good Guys with Bad Press," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39, no 4 (2013): 24-36, paragraph 7.

<sup>5</sup> Peter and John in Acts 4, Josiah the blind beggar in John 9 regarding Jesus.

many pots,<sup>6</sup> ergo, saving them money. Deines continues, “The Pharisees are the only known Jewish group (at least until this idea was perhaps taken over by followers of Jesus as well) that was willing to “compromise” the Biblical law in such a way that it becomes practicable for as many people as possible.”<sup>7</sup> This information would lead one to question the oft-maligned reputation the Pharisees had in Scripture and could provide insight into Paul’s own approach to discipline which will be discussed later. It should be noted that Deines discounts the biblical text when it comes to descriptions of Pharisees as polemic stating, “The main problem is that scholars and laypeople alike too often ignore the fact that polemical texts cannot be taken at face value for historical information.” This puts Deines in the camp that would discount Jesus’ diatribe of seven woes towards Pharisees calling it self-serving only to Matthew and not to be taken seriously regarding said group, and by inclusion, Paul.<sup>8</sup>

Professor Matthew Goldstone writes, “The primary Hebrew term for discipline in antiquity is *musar*. Declined from the Hebrew verbal root *y.s.r* meaning discipline, rebuke, warning, teaching, and suffering, this key concept plays a pivotal role in Jewish wisdom literature.”<sup>9</sup> Goldstone goes on to explain, “While on the one hand *musar* is backward looking with the intent of correcting wrongs, its primary purpose is forward-looking, toward the improvement of one’s moral qualities.”<sup>10</sup> Quoting from other Judaic sources, Goldstone cites Ben Sira, “Following in the path of Proverbs, Ben Sira encourages disciplining the fool: ‘Do not be ashamed to correct (*paideias/musar*) the stupid or foolish or the aged who are guilty of sexual immorality,’”<sup>11</sup> a subject the apostle would later address post-conversion in his

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, paragraph 5.

<sup>7</sup> Deines, Biblical Views, paragraph 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, paragraph 3.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Goldstone. "DUAL DIMENSIONS OF DISCIPLINE IN JEWISH WISDOM AND EARLY RABBINIC SOURCES," *Shofar* 35, no. 3 (Spring, 2017): 115,133,149, pp 2.

<sup>10</sup> Goldstone, Dual Dimensions, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 4.

letters to the churches such at Corinth,<sup>12</sup> and Thessalonica.<sup>13</sup> As stated earlier, Paul was a Pharisee, and as such, pre-conversion, would have likely followed the Pharisaic traditions when it came to discipline. He participated in Stephen's death in Acts chapter seven, and in Acts 8:1 we read, "And Saul approved of his execution." While the argument has been made regarding Paul's Pharisaic background, there is another direction that should be analyzed. Pharisees were, to a degree, strict adherents to the Jewish Law. Zealots, in comparison, were much more radical in their interpretations of said laws. This becomes important because Paul has been described as a Zealot and has even described his own actions as overly zealous.<sup>14</sup> The Zealot's intent, with regards to discipline, seems to be designed more towards maintaining the strictest purity of their religious practices at all costs. Dr. Mark Fairchild gives the historian Josephus' definitions of a Zealot, in which the first-century historian uses several terms describing various rebel groups that emerged during the first century of Roman occupation in Palestine. He refers to some of them as bandits, brigands, or robbers, others he describes as Sicarii, and finally Zealots.<sup>15</sup> Fairchild goes on to expound, "One may be able to discern Zealots among the Pharisees as well. Josephus described the fourth 'philosophy' as having Pharisaic teachings and claimed that some of the founders and devotees of this new ideology were Pharisees."<sup>16</sup> Fairchild explains that "zealotry" in this sense is concerned with those who posed a threat against the exercise and promotion of the Torah.<sup>17</sup> This would support the reason Paul might consider himself, or be considered by others, a zealot.

In Galatians 1:14 Paul describes himself thusly, "And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous I was for the traditions of my fathers." While the

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians, Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Thessalonians, Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> Philippians 3:6.

<sup>15</sup> Mark R. Fairchild, "Paul's pre-Christian Zealot associations: A re-examination of Gal 1.14 and Acts 22.3." *New Testament Studies* 45, no. 4(1999): 514. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 12

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 12-13

exact interpretation of the word “zealous” in this passage has been interpreted both as a zealot and simply zealous, Paul’s actions in persecuting the church in Scriptures pre-conversion lend themselves to the former interpretation. Paul even states this in verse 13, “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” When added to Fairchild’s description of a prominent Zealot, Mattathias, “The zealotry of Mattathias had first, a zeal for the purity of the ancestral traditions, and second, a zeal that drove him to slay infidels who would pose serious threats to the security of those traditions,” one can see the similarities.

The Apostle’s pre-conversion approach to discipline, as mentioned earlier, was driven by his Pharisaic background combined with the somewhat militaristic zeal of a first century Zealot. After having been given authority by the Jewish religious leaders, Paul set out on his way to forcibly return converted Jews to Jerusalem to stand trial for becoming followers of Jesus, in other words, for violating the Jewish way. His approach could be considered by some as leaning towards the extreme of disciplinary measures resulting in imprisonment or even death as a means of punishment for the offending Jewish Christians. The book of Acts, chapter nine, gives a detailed description of Paul’s conversion. It is on his way to carry out these threats that he encounters Jesus in a vision. This encounter would lead to Paul’s becoming one of the Christians he had so violently pursued. He would later answer a call to go and preach the gospel to the Gentile nations resulting in the establishment of several churches. In Paul’s letters to these churches, there are several examples of the apostle addressing disciplinary matters. Subjects range from admonishing idleness and avoiding those who don’t obey sound teaching directed to the church at Thessalonica<sup>18</sup> to rebuking insubordinate deceivers in Titus,<sup>19</sup> and on other occasions to an exhortation to forgive following punishment so as not to overwhelm a believer.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:14.

<sup>19</sup> Titus 1:13.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.

One thing that stands out is that Paul does not always use the same method of discipline, as Stacey Obenhaus reveals, "In these passages one finds Paul recommending a range of responses to the erring church member: from gentle restoration to punishment and forgiveness, to complete and absolute expulsion."<sup>21</sup> On one occasion, Obenhaus tells us, "In 1 Corinthians, Paul commands the church to expel a man who is living with his father's wife. Seeming to leave no room for the possibility of the man's repentance and restoration to the community, Paul concludes: 'Drive out the wicked person from among you.'<sup>22</sup> ",<sup>23</sup> which seems to be harsh. Alternatively, Obenhaus lays out an argument that, at times, the apostle seems more concerned with the unity of the entire body than an individual's sin. He writes, "...that the church is like a mixture of dough, and a little leaven can ruin the entire mixture, and that the church should be unleavened as it celebrates the sacrifice of Christ, the paschal lamb."<sup>24</sup> He argues that the "individual" described in 1 Corinthians is not described in near as much detail as his addressing of the entire church body and its defilement. This approach comports with the Pharisaic intention of purity of God's chosen people. Alternately, Obenhaus differentiates Paul from the Judaic principle of purification saying of Paul, "He tells the Corinthians to end their punishment of this man, forgive and console him, and reaffirm their love for him lest he be overcome by excessive sorrow."<sup>25</sup> ",<sup>26</sup> There is an emphasis on redemption in these instructions.

A picture begins to unfold of a church leader who was trained in the teachings of Pharisaic law, a law that was concerned with not only purification but making holiness available to all Jews. Paul then seems to have adopted some of the Zealot's characteristics, in that he pursues the Christians with a fervor resulting in mob mentality style

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<sup>21</sup> Stacy R. Obenhaus, 2001. "Sanctified entirely: the theological focus of Paul's instructions for church discipline." *Restoration Quarterly* 43, no. 1: 1-12.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 1

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>25</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 6-7

murders, such as in the martyr Stephen's case and mass arrests. Upon his conversion to Christianity, he adopts a more inclusive, unifying approach that is much less violent. But Paul does not abandon his Pharisaic teachings and background altogether. On the contrary, he incorporates much of it into his teachings on discipline to the churches he watches over, which in the end, are made up of largely non-Jewish congregations. He does, however, seem to have abandoned the militaristic Zealot's approach to religious practice.

One other area in question needs to be analyzed. Paul's approach, compared to Jesus', seems to be quite similar, each expressing concern for the purity of the individual and collective body but also showing compassion and grace with an emphasis on restoration of the individual. James Sanders, in his article "Torah and Christ" sums up how the Apostle reconciled his pre-and post-conversion feelings towards Christ,

"It was Paul's conviction that if one read the Torah story, emphasizing it as a story of God's works of salvation and righteousness for ancient Israel, then one could not escape seeing that God had wrought another salvation, and committed another righteousness, in Christ just like the ones of old but an even greater one!"<sup>27</sup>

Paul has come to the realization that salvation no longer comes from the strict following of the Law, but that God had wrought salvation now through Christ. Jesus himself speaks to the issue of church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17 where he exhorts,

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by

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<sup>27</sup> James A. Sanders, "Torah and Christ." *Interpretation* 29, no. 4 (October 1975): 372-390.

the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Once again, we see an approach to discipline that follows a progression from individual, to witness, to church, and ultimately to expulsion from the body. When compared to Paul’s graduated approach in Titus 3:10 where the Apostle asserts, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned,” one can see the similarities.

In conclusion, after analyzing and comparing the disciplinary philosophies of the Pharisees and the Zealots, we can see that Paul abandoned the Zealot’s mentality but was still able to apply much of his Pharisaic approach, albeit tempered by his conversion, relationship, and calling with Christ. The study of Matthew 18 reveals that Jesus’ teaching on discipline, at least in this incident, comported with Paul’s approach.

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