

Hello everyone

After his conversion Paul spent three years in a Gentile district East of the Jordan river and Damascus.

We don't really know what he was doing there, but he was probably working unsuccessfully as a Christian missionary. He aroused enough hostility that he had to flee Damascus.

Paul then visits Peter briefly. Peter was the primary leader of the church in Jerusalem at this time, but Paul was adamant that he preached his gospel by divine revelation and not from being taught by a person so it is unlikely that he was with Peter simply for a crash course in spreading the gospel message. It seems more likely that he was becoming familiar with some of the traditions of the early church like the last supper or baptism or Jesus suffering, death and resurrection. The stories of Jesus that were circulating.

Paul then went onto work as a missionary in his home region around Tarsus, but at some point over the next fourteen years, Barnabas a leader in the church at Antioch brought him to help in this Greek Jewish Christian ministry.

Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman empire after Rome and Alexandria and was a place where cultures and traditions met and mixed. It was on the best land route between Asia Minor and Syria and Palestine. The best route to travel between East and West.

So, many cultures and religions mixed here directly; and on more or less equal terms and so the establishment of a church here was of great importance for the growth and development of the New Testament church.

The New Testament itself speaks of Antioch as the place in which the disciples were first called Christians. For Paul it is the place where he starts the most active part of his life and work as a Christian. At Antioch, he had the support of a well located and missionary minded church. and with its support Paul started the missionary work that is a major part of the story in the book of Acts and can be seen on the maps in our bibles. Acts reports Paul as taking an initial journey to Cyprus and parts of Galatia, but this trip is not mentioned in any of Paul's letters.

Paul though is successful in Antioch and eventually he and Barnabas are authorised, or so Luke tells the story, to go to work spreading the gospel message in the gentile world.

This was after the Jerusalem conference which was held around 48CE and is one of the major events in early Christianity. Paul says in his letter to the church in Galatia that he went along as an independent church, took Barnabas and Titus with him and played a dominant role in the proceedings. Elsewhere Luke seems to infer they were invited as delegates from the church at Antioch. The conference is described by Luke in the book of Acts, but there are differences between the account Luke gives and the letter Paul writes to the Galatians.

The central issue under discussion is to what extent if at all, did a Gentile have to become a law abiding Jew including being circumcised to become a Christian?

There seems to have been three points of view at the conference, three factions if you like.

There was group who considered the Torah was still in effect and that circumcision was necessary.

There were the Jerusalem leaders – James, Peter and John who were the ones who would decide the outcome.

And there were Paul, Barnabas and Titus looking to provide the universal welcome that Paul will talk about in his letters.

What was at stake was how the mission to the Gentiles, the non Jews, was to proceed. That was the mission that was at the heart of Paul's ministry and maybe at the heart of the church at Antioch too.

These were high stakes that were being played for.

According to Paul's version in Galatians, the first group, those who considered the complete Torah was still in effect lost the debate and he won.

The Jewish leaders, James, Peter and John then came to a compromise with Paul and Barnabas. Peter was entrusted with spreading the gospel to the circumcised, Paul and his companions were allowed to preach to the gentiles, the non Jews. The leaders of the church then sign the deal by giving Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. It turns out that our tradition of offering the right hand of fellowship at

important points of church life flows right back to the start of the New Testament itself.

And all that seems very neat and tidy, until you read the parts of the New Testament where it is clear that Paul has opponents from within the church still.

It makes you wonder just how strong and long lasting the compromise that was made was?

See if you can unravel parts of it, by reading Galatians and parts of the Corinthians letters. Did Paul even actually lose out? It does seem a bit strange that most of his work is centred around Ephesus not Antioch.

What do you make of that?

There was another part of the decision at the Jerusalem conference that affected Paul. The compromise agreed to by James, John and Peter included a reminder to remember the poor which Paul tells us he was keen to do in his letter to the Galatians.

This was about Paul collecting money from members of the Gentile mission for the poor who lived in Jerusalem. It's important for Paul, he mentions it in several letters.

In Corinthians he tells us something of how it worked in practice.

On the first day of the week each of you is to put aside and save whatever you can so that collections need not be taken when I come to see you. I will send them onto Jerusalem and if it seems advisable, I will accompany the money. The collection is so important to Paul that he is willing to put himself in danger to take to Jerusalem.

In Romans we read that Paul kept his promise to the Jerusalem conference.

Throughout Paul's letters we feel that Paul has opponents but working out just who they are is difficult and they often seem to differ from church to church.

But the importance of keeping them at the back of your mind as you read Paul's letter is that they act as a reminder that the church has always had diverse views.

There has never been a one size fits all type of Christianity. Debate and discussion has been important to the church right from the start, just as it is today.

Some of you will be aware that one of the most common comments from the moderator at the General assembly is 'Questions are always in order'.

It seems that it has been like that from the start of the church. Questions, debates and the right hand of fellowship underpin all the church of Scotland does and links us right back to the churches of Paul who spreads the good news of Jesus back at the start of the church.

Peace be with you,

Amen.