

The World of Paul

Paul recognized that Christianity needed to address itself to the questions and concerns of its day: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews...To those outside the law (to the Gentiles) I became as one outside the law...that I might win those outside the law" (1 Cor. 9:20-21). We will have a better appreciation of Paul's letters if we understand the world in which he lived.

Paul was a city person and his world was predominantly urban. Though there were regional differences, all the major cities where Paul preached and wrote were united by the common languages and cultures of Greece and Rome. There was the more recent Roman legal and political organization over all the empire, but there was still the art, literature and philosophy of the preceding Greek empire which Rome adopted. Paul redesigned Christianity from the simple message of Jesus, not to change its essence, but to adapt it from a rural, Jewish setting to this urban, Gentile culture. The cities were a cosmopolitan then as they are now.

Urban Social Classes

There were varied classes of people and some chance for social and economic mobility, at least within the middle and lower classes, and with the help of patrons. **The very exclusive upper class comprised the distinguished families of the city of Rome** who extended themselves into the empire as some of the administrators or military commanders. On the next level were **the local aristocracy composed of those with property and capital for manufacture and trade**. Then there were the **small landowners, the craftsmen and the shopkeepers**. As a tentmaker, Paul himself would fit into this category. Next came **the freed men and women** who were able to move out of **slavery**, which was, finally, the lot of the lowest class.

People ended up in **slavery** through captivity from war, through kidnapping by slave hunters, because of debt, or by being born of slaves. The economic structures of the empire were built upon the system of slavery, which made it difficult to eradicate the practice without creating social upheaval. There was also a difference between the treatment of slaves who were used simply like beasts of burden in farms, mines, and other heavy construction work, and slaves who were members of households. These later often had administrative tasks, traveled for their masters on business, signed legal contracts and earned money for their own use. Such slaves also had the security of a home and basic necessities, so much so that often, when a slave had the means to purchase freedom, he or she as a freed person then pledged self to the former master or to a patron in order to receive the basics of survival. All this complexity helps explain why Paul did not press for the elimination of slavery, though it does not diminish the immorality of the system. The centrality of slavery leads Paul to devote much ethical consideration to the relationship of master and slave and to offer at least the principles that will eventually eliminate it altogether. The prominence of slavery also explains why Paul uses slave imagery to speak about

sin, freedom vocabulary to talk about salvation and free commitment to Christ as a way to describe the consequence of our liberation.

The **Jews** generally found themselves also within all the classes of Greek society, having settled widely within these territories from as far back as 587 BC, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and sent many of the Jews into exile. In general, they were an accepted part of the Roman Empire and participated actively in city life, though they were not always fully understood and sometimes shunned behavior that they could not accommodate to their beliefs. For example, the Jews found it offensive to offer incense to the emperor, though they made it a point to express respect for his authority. They also found it difficult to enter military service, since it created obstacles to their Sabbath worship and dietary laws. They were also uncomfortable with contributing to the support of the local temples. While these particular traits sometimes raised hostility from the society around them, generally they were tolerated. The Romans even occasionally granted formal exemptions from such practices and allowed the Jews to send tax money to Jerusalem for the support of the Temple, which had been rebuilt after the Exile.

The gathering places for Jews in the cities of the empire were the **synagogues**, which served not only as places of worship, but also as schools and community centers. They also provided places of contact for visitors to a city and for travelers in search of work. Paul, who was a tentmaker, could establish contact with others in his trade, when he reached a new city on his journeys, and they could help him secure his means of support. Thus, if Acts is historically accurate, Paul on his journeys went first to the synagogues to facilitate his livelihood as well as to find a ready audience for his preaching.

There was probably a wider audience for Paul in the synagogues than just the Jews. The strong moral standards of the Jews and their monotheism also attracted Gentiles toward the religious, and the Jews in the empire were much more open to converts than were those in Jerusalem. Thus, there were frequently **Gentile sympathizers** worshiping with the Jews in their synagogues. Not all these Gentiles formally converted to Judaism. Those who did were called **proselytes** and they underwent official initiation into the religion, with the men also receiving circumcision. Those who did not were called **God-fearers** and they shared in Sabbath worship or other Jewish activities without becoming Jews. Thus, through the synagogue Paul's preaching reached beyond the Jews to begin touching even the Gentile world of the empire.

The **Roman Empire saw itself as one large family** composed of smaller households. Each household was composed, not only of a couple and their children, but also of extended family and of other families, friends and associates who were involved in the agriculture, commerce, craft, or other business by which the household survived. Wealthier households had freed persons and slaves as well. Very often these varied groups of people lived in the

household, in a number of buildings on wealthy estates or in varied apartments or rooms in simpler households.

Thus, the **household** was a large social unit and the place of business, some social life, and daily conversation. Paul would have worked out of such households as a co-worker, using the occasions as opportunities to preach as well. Frequently, when the master of the house converted to Christianity, the entire household followed. In any case, the household became the base for a church.