

**Paul – A Legal Case Study**  
**Chapter 7**  
**Witnesses**

The movie *My Cousin Vinny* gives a parody of a situation that actually arises often in trials. In the movie, the defense attorney's girlfriend takes the stand to testify about the kind of car that would have left certain tracks at a murder scene. Even though the witness is a girlfriend to the defense attorney, she is far from the friendly witness. The couple had been in the midst of a fight at the point in the movie where the young lady took the stand. Her antagonism to the lawyer is apparent to a humorous level.

At one point in frustration, the lawyer says to the judge, "Permission to treat the witness as a hostile witness, please?" To anyone it is a humorous moment, but especially to a trial lawyer.

One of the things that the courtroom reinforces over and over is that real witnesses have sharp edges at times. Anyone who testifies 100% supportive of another has a bit of unbelievability about them. It's just not the way people are. That is not to say lawyers magnify areas of disagreement, but we don't run from them. They are real.

This becomes especially important as I consider the witnesses for Paul. The fact that there is a common religious conviction, faith, and movement would naturally cast a bit of suspicion onto the witnesses. After all, Barnabas and Paul are both working toward the same end, both trying to persuade the world that Jesus was God made man who then suffered and died as a substitute for the sins of humanity, being physically resurrected to bring eternity to those who follow him. Wouldn't you expect a common bias and support from Barnabas to Paul?

At first glance, that would be a logical expectation and conclusion. However, it is not a fair one if we consider human nature. Human beings are driven by self-interest and self-aggrandizement. We also tend to form sides, even when we have a common purpose. Politics exist on many levels, even within the same political party. This is being written at a time when the Republican party in the United States has control of the presidency, the senate, and the congress. Does that mean a united Washington D.C.? Not at all. Within the Republican party are different factions, different agendas, different power plays. Not all Republicans like all Republicans. Some wish to see others fall flat on their faces. It is not all roses and *Kumbaya*.

This raises the question of whether or not the Biblical accounts we are using to base testimony on are accurate or whitewashed. Does the Bible gloss over the human element to produce a propaganda piece? I think not. This aspect of the witnesses needs to be brought forth in any defense of Paul.

## The Witness of John Mark

In discussing the role of Barnabas as a witness, it needs to be said that Paul and Barnabas were not the only two who went on the first missionary trip. They took with them as a helper, Barnabas's cousin, John Mark (Acts 13:5). John Mark was on the island of Cyprus and saw the conversion of the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, along with Paul cursing the sorcerer Elymas with blindness. From there the missionary group went to the mainland arriving at Perga in Pamphylia (on the coast of Turkey).

We don't know what happened at that point, but John Mark abandoned Barnabas and Paul. While the mission effort continued inland at Pisidian Antioch, John Mark turned around and went home. He returned to Jerusalem. The departure was not friendly, and it engendered hard feelings.

One would naturally expect that when John Mark got back to the apostles and church in Jerusalem, that he would have some unsavory things to say about Paul. After all, Paul was never on the best footing with the church. He had already had to deal with the fact he had been the major persecutor of the church, had overseen the first Christian martyrdom, and had left Jerusalem choosing to work on his own in Tarsus and beyond, rather than staying there as an integral part of the thriving first Christian community.

If reading the stories for the first time, one might be on the lookout for the kind of reception Paul would get when and if he returned to Jerusalem. The reception was not what one might expect based on human nature, however. After the missionary trip concluded, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to fill in the church on the events.

Luke writes,

and all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles (Acts 15:11-13).

The Jerusalem church then sent out some others with Paul and Barnabas to communicate their thoughts with the believers in Antioch. At this point, the church writes a letter calling both Paul and Barnabas (okay, the church listed Barnabas first!) "dear friends" (Acts 15:25). John Mark had not poisoned the church against Paul. It seems that honesty and mission trumped personal feelings and agendas.

Paul and Barnabas continued their joint ministry teaching in Antioch, but after a while, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return and strengthen the churches they started on their first missionary trip. Barnabas wanted to go, but wanted to take his cousin John Mark again.

Here again, the role of witness comes under the microscope. Was all good? Is the written record an example of a white washed effort to show only sunshine and a panacea of united people? No, not at all!

The record shows that Paul would not hear of it. Luke says,

Paul thought it best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work” (Acts 15:38).

These two longtime friends, co-workers for years, could not work out the problem.

And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other (Acts 15:39).

How bad was it? Bad enough that Paul took Silas for the return trip while Barnabas took Mark and they went their separate ways.

Was that it? Did this “sharp disagreement” end their friendship or disrupt their Christian fellowship? Without knowing all the details, the record gives enough evidence to answer this question, “No!”

Just four years later, Paul wrote the Corinthians and spoke of Barnabas in positive ways that indicated to the Corinthians that Paul thought of Barnabas much as he thought of himself. Paul’s letter also indicates that both Paul and Barnabas had both worked together in Corinth.

Is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? (1 Cor. 9:6).

What of John Mark? We know that seven or eight years after Paul started the missionary journey after refusing to bring Mark along, Paul wrote a letter to the Colossian church indicating Paul was working with Mark.

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions— if he comes to you, welcome him) (Col. 4:10.)

Nearly ten years later, too late for Paul’s trial in this case, but reflective of the record nonetheless, when Paul is in the final years of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy,

Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry (2 Tim. 4:11).

## The Witness of Peter

Perhaps no witness is as interesting for examination as that of Peter. By way of background, Peter was one of Jesus' chosen twelve. More than that, he was the outspoken one whom Jesus called out in powerful ways. Peter made the proclamation of faith that formed the basis of Christianity.

When Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be, Peter is the one who answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16: 16). Jesus then replied,

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:17-19).

Peter was no lightweight! This was seen further in the accounts of the earliest church. Peter preached the sermon that opened the church's doors, so to speak. On the day called Pentecost, about 7 weeks after the resurrection, and after Jesus had ascended to heaven, Peter was the one who stood up and preached about the events to assembled Jews in Jerusalem, seeing over 3,000 come to faith in one day.

It was Peter who first preached the good news of Jesus as Messiah to non-Jews, being sent by God to lead the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household to faith in nearby Caesarea (Acts 10).

Simply considering the authority and position of Peter in light of what Paul was about and how important Paul became in the early church would make anyone curious to see the interaction of the two. Would Paul become Peter's sycophant, or yes-man, saying what he would, treating Peter with over-the-top flattery to become the number two? Would Paul's super-competitive drive cause him to try and roll over Peter, producing a power play that made the church choose between the two?

Interestingly, neither of the above happened. Instead, both Paul and Peter's conviction for the reality of Jesus as resurrected God and the truth of the mission to spread that good news to the world caused them to rise above normal human reactions. Several episodes are worthy of note, and would be relevant testimony to this.

First, Peter was part of the church that was finally receptive to Paul in Jerusalem. He was part of the church that sent letters of support, calling Paul a dear friend. This was not because Paul was Peter's yes-man. Far from it.

Paul actually confronted Peter over an important issue among the early Christians. Because Christianity started among Jews who saw and believed Jesus was their resurrected Messiah, it was quite a jolt when the believers realized that Gentiles were included in the “Christian family” as well. Jews had always known they were the chosen people, and they had anticipated the Messiah from their beginning. But the idea that others might be chosen to participate in the blessing, even though it was rooted in Jewish Scriptures, still seemed a bit startling.

Peter knew that the conversion of Cornelius with his family was an exception, but Judaism was loaded with “exceptions.” King David’s great-grandmother was not born Jewish. She was a Moabite named Ruth. She had converted to Judaism after becoming a widow and following her mother-in-law back to Israel (see generally the Old Testament book of Ruth).

Paul’s mission efforts went far beyond “exceptions,” however, and the Gentile believers were coming into the church in great numbers. This raised an important question the church leaders in Jerusalem had to address. Did Gentiles need to become Jewish in order to become Christians?

I would likely use both Barnabas and Paul as witnesses on this point because the answer is relevant to both the core issue of whether Paul was trying to subvert Judaism and the law, as well as the credibility and authenticity of the record demonstrated through its treatment of witnesses like Peter.

After Paul and Barnabas returned from their first mission effort, the peace that the Antioch church had enjoyed was upset. Some unnamed men came to Antioch from Judea. These men were teaching that one must be circumcised under the Law of Moses to be saved. This was tantamount to declaring that one must convert to Judaism in order to be a Christian.

Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and debate with them” (Acts 15:2) and then ultimately headed to Jerusalem to speak with the elders and apostles there about the subject. Their arrival in Jerusalem was marked first by a hearty welcome by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas had a chance to recount “all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4).

No doubt as they walked through the mission trip, the Jewish excitement and the Jewish rejection, the great number of Gentile conversions, and the persecutions in conjunction with church growth, the Gentile aspect of the experience provoked a response among some of the church. Luke said,

...some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and order them to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:5).

The issue in Jerusalem, like at Antioch, provoked a good deal of debate and discussion. Peter brought the debate to a close when he stood and reminded the people that God had saved Gentiles without the Law of Moses. God gave them the Holy Spirit and cleansed their “hearts by faith” in Jesus, not by becoming Jews (Acts 15:9). Peter then asked why the church should challenge God by putting on the Gentiles a burden of keeping the Jewish laws. That was a burden that even the Jews could not keep! Peter knew, and the church agreed, that the Gentiles “will be saved through the gift of the Lord Jesus” just as the Jews (Acts. 15:11).

At this, the crowd was silenced. It was then that Barnabas and Paul stood and detailed the “signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). This left the church with a perplexing problem. No doubt Peter was right; God was saving Jew and Gentile through his grace, the gift of Jesus. Jesus was the salvation with no added works of Jewish Law. Salvation was through the fact that Christ died on behalf of sinners who couldn’t keep the Law. Christ took the place of sinners who should die for their own sins, but no longer needed to do so. People were made right with God because of Christ alone, not Christ plus anything humans could do to merit God’s love. Still, there were some concerns of a number of believers that were putting a serious strain on the fellowship of the church.

The apostles and elders decided that the solution was to write a letter to be sent through Barnabas and Paul to lay the necessary instructions for behavior that would keep the harmony and fellowship in the church. These requirements included abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.<sup>1</sup>

At some point, though, we are uncertain whether it was before the events detailed above or perhaps afterwards, the issue in Antioch took an unusual turn. Here is where Peter’s testimony and the Biblical account rings of authenticity. Peter came to the church in Antioch and ate the common meals where Jewish and Gentile believers broke bread together. Fellowship between the two groups was not disturbed by how they became Christians (through Judaism or as Gentiles); rather they found Christianity to unite them as one, regardless of genetics or previous beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul would later write the Corinthians about some of these issues. Paul explained that meat sacrificed to idols was not in itself sinful, but that it was an issue for many in the fellowship. In an effort to love and serve the greater number, Paul would not only avoid meat sacrificed to idols, but would willingly give up eating meat at all! (1 Cor. 8).

Peter shared this fellowship and view, participating in common meals, but while in Antioch, some messengers came from Jerusalem associated with James, explaining that Peter's behavior was drawing unnecessary criticism from the Jewish leadership outside the church. This could be seen as a precursor to restarted persecution for the church, and Peter was asked, in essence, to back away from the Gentiles. Peter did so.

This did not comport with Paul's understanding of right and wrong, and likely didn't with Peter's either. As Peter withdrew from overt fellowship with the Gentile believers, other Jews in Antioch followed suit, even Barnabas.

Here is the key testimony I would want a jury to see. These events are not white washed. These events do not show Paul as Peter's yes-man. Instead, the record is clear. Paul confronted Peter and called him and the Jews who followed him "hypocrites" for living inconsistently with what they knew to be the truth. Paul called their hand for living to please people in ways that displeased God and went against the core of the faith.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the story is the reaction of Peter. While we don't have it specifically, if the scholars are right that these events came before the big meeting in Jerusalem on the issue, Peter clearly shared Paul's view as the right one. Furthermore, as Peter's life went on, it was apparent that he and Paul continued in mutual love and respect. Paul speaks fondly of Peter in later letters, and Peter does of Paul as well.<sup>2</sup>

These witnesses to these facts show me that Peter and Barnabas, as the accounts are given to us, are real people. There were real issues and real interactions. The record is not some white washed effort to make everything seem smooth. It shows humanity in its short comings, but also shows the deep conviction that caused these men to rise above normal human feelings of defensiveness, hurt, and competition. Something was genuine enough to trump all of that.

## **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. *"For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law"* (Gal. 3:21).

I love making loaves of wheat bread. My recipe calls for white flour, wheat flour, yeast, salt, honey, and water. The recipe is from a fellow who won the international bread baking championship. He makes bread for a living. Me? I make bread for a hobby. I have never

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<sup>2</sup> See Paul's references in his first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 9:5; 15:5). In those, Paul calls Peter by his Aramaic name, "Cephas." As for Peter's respect for Paul, see 2 Peter 3:15 where he speaks of Paul's wisdom and sees Paul's writings on the level of "Scripture."

even entered a bread-making competition. So, I am making his bread, and I am following his recipe. I want my bread to taste as close to his as possible. His bread is really that good!

Now, I have made other breads. One kind of bread I love to make is called “Gibassier.” It also contains flour, yeast, and salt, but beyond those ingredients, the recipe is different. Gibassier uses eggs (I use Eggbeaters!) and milk. The bread is truly tasty, but it is very different from the loaves of wheat bread I make.

Might I be foolish enough to add some of the eggs and milk to the world-famous wheat bread I am making? After all, the eggs and milk certainly “work” in the gibassier! I would not be so foolish as to make those changes, and if I did make those changes, no one would expect the end product to turn out the same.

I would never add to the breadmaster’s recipe and expect to get the same product. Yet, since the very earliest days of the church, we have seen the constant and recurrent attempts by many to add something to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why is this a problem? Why do people repeatedly tamper with God’s perfect recipe? Perhaps it has to do with our desire to be special, or be in control, or be “right.” Whatever the reason, we must always guard against it! Jesus is our soul’s salvation. Jesus. Not Jesus plus; but simply Jesus.

2. Paul and Barnabas had a chance to recount “*all that God had done with them*” (Acts 15:4).

I am amazed when I stand back and look at my life in faith. God has done some wonderful things in all of his children, and it seems appropriate to stop and consider those. Can you join me in contemplating the moving hand of God in our lives? Then can we together praise him?

3. “*in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 3:26-28).

The human problem with God is common to all. We aren’t perfect in holiness. Sin has corrupted us and we need to be made clean. We can’t clean ourselves; we need a rebirth. We need to become new in Christ, the resurrected Lord. Humanity’s common problem has a common solution – Jesus. That breaks down walls of division, be they heredity, gender, skin color, education, or economic status. Sin and forgiveness are the great equalizers. May we live that truth.