

Romans 16:5b Epaenetus

Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia (Romans 16:5b)

Epaenetus appears only in this verse so we don't know much about him. Nevertheless there is a lot we can learn. His name is Greek, which means, like Phoebe, he was a Greek speaking Gentile. He represents the mystery of the gospel, that in Christ believing Gentiles have become *fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers in Christ Jesus through the gospel* (Ephesians 3:6). Remember, the church as we know it today is not spiritual Israel, or replaced Israel in God's purposes, but we have been spiritually *grafted in* (Romans 11:17). So there is no need to spiritualise the Old Testament. Like Epaenetus, if we are a convert to Christ, then we also are fellow-heirs: *heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him* (Romans 8:17). As fellow-heirs we have been called to follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24-25). To follow Jesus in this world is the way of sufferings, such as temptations, rejection, grief, pain, disappointment and persecutions. But this is so that in the world to come we may be glorified with him.

Paul describes Epaenetus as *the first convert to Christ in Asia*. In 1Corinthians 16:15 the household of Stephanas are also called the *first converts in Asia* (NB Asia = Achaia = ἀχαϊας). They can't all be the first convert in Asia! But the word for *convert* is also translated as *firstfruit*: *Salute my wellbeloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia unto Christ* (KJV). It is most likely that Paul is referring to Epaenetus as part of the firstfruits of the gentile harvest to which Paul referred to earlier in Romans: *I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in* (Romans 11:25). This Gentile harvest is still coming in. But in these last days, with the return of the Jews to their homeland, there are good reasons for believing that the end of the Gentile harvest is coming into view.

We are part of the Gentile harvest in Britain, even 2000 years later! As the firstfruits of the harvest we have the firstfruits of the Spirit: *And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies* (Romans 8:23). The gift of the Spirit is not the fullness of our redemption, but it is the seal and guarantee of our redemption, our inheritance in the kingdom of Christ (Ephesians 1:13-14). Epaenetus' name means *praiseworthy*, and his redeemed life was to the praise of His glory. We are to the praise of His glory because this redemption is entirely a work of His grace. He receives all the glory; we cannot redeem ourselves!

Even if Paul refers to Epaenetus as part of the firstfruits of the Gentile harvest, he was still a *convert to Christ*. Last week the story of Priscilla and Aquila reminded us that the church in the New Testament sense of the word, that met in their house, is the people, not the building. Epaenetus reminds us that the church (the *ecclesia*) is not even the people who meet together! The true church is made up of the people who are converts to Christ. These people are then established upon the apostolic teaching (the New Testament), with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

There is a phrase which has entered modern evangelicalism: 'belonging before believing'. The idea is that our postmodern generation, especially the young, need to belong to a church before they can really believe and come to faith. In one sense this is true, and we should be the most loving and welcoming church we can possibly be! Usually people need a friend in church to stick with it. But the spiritual reality is that no-one can belong to the *ecclesia* unless we first believe, unless we are first a true convert to Christ. When you are a convert you know deep down you belong to Christ. We

all look for acceptance from those around us. But the acceptance we really need comes from God alone. To be justified by faith is to be accepted by Him. I believe much of the LGBT agenda is being driven by this deep need for acceptance. Other human beings (and society) can never meet this need. What we need is the acceptance Christ offers, and become part of the body of Christ.

Epaenetus as a convert was part of His body: *so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others* (Romans 12:5). We can understand what the body of Christ is from the analogy of marriage: *For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands* (Ephesians 5:23). In marriage the two become one flesh. In a Christian marriage the understanding is that the wife's body belongs to the husband and the husband's body belongs to the wife. This is supposed to represent the relationship Christ has with his church: *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church* (Ephesians 5:32). Christ is the Head of his body, the church, and we submit to Him through His Word and His Spirit. The church is His bride waiting for Him to return for the marriage supper of the Lamb. But the church also has a mission to preach the gospel and to make disciples. It is impossible to belong to this spiritual reality called the church without first believing, being a convert to Christ.

One night Nicodemus went to talk with Jesus, and Jesus challenged him: *no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again* (John 3:3). Jesus used the language of being born again because he was speaking with a Jew. The Jewish idea of salvation was to be born a Jew (ethnicity), and then to keep the Torah in this life. (Not salvation by works, which is the Lutheran and Reformed view. This was recently confirmed to me by Dr Mike Thompson, Ridley College, at his lectures at Waterbeach.) Nicodemus thought being born and living as a good Jew was good enough. Jesus said it was not: *Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit*. The same is true for us. There is no way on God's earth you can belong to, or enter into the eternal kingdom of God unless you are born of the Spirit = a convert. It is impossible. No amount of loving acceptance on the part of Christians will usher anyone into the kingdom. There is only one way we can find this acceptance, and become part of the church, His body and bride, and that is by coming to Him in a spirit of repentance, like King David: *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight* (Psalm 51:4). We need a spirit of repentance like the prodigal son: *I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."* We can only come as we turn from our sin and place our faith in Christ who justifies and accepts sinners.

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). *The law of sin and death* (Romans 8:2) = *the wages of sin is death*. But there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (converts) because *the law of the Spirit of life (= the free gift of God) has freed us from the law of sin and death* (Romans 8:2).

As converts we are part of God's family. Paul calls Epaenetus *my beloved*, a term of great affection. (NIV says *my dear friend*). The word is *agapetos*, which is the noun form of *agape*, the love of God. It is the same word God the Father used of His Son Jesus at His baptism (Matthew 3:17). Paul uses the word in Romans for all the saints (Romans 1:7, 12:19), the unconverted Jews (Romans 11:28), and other individuals: Amplias (Romans 16:8), Stachys (Romans 16:19) and Persis (Romans 16:12). We can see there was a bond of deep affection holding these 1st century Christians together as the body of Christ as they endured their trials and tribulations (Philippians 2:1-4).