

Organized Religion's Most Astonishing Advocate

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

Imagine if a man like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, or Sam Harris (or the late Christopher Hitchens) suddenly became an advocate of organized religion. How astonishing would it be if one of these "Four Horsemen of New Atheism" suddenly began to publish articles on the necessity of globally organized faith communities?

Yet there is a far more astonishing advocate of organized religion within the pages of the Bible itself. Who is this person? Saul of Tarsus – otherwise known as the Apostle Paul.

If you don't find it surprising that the Apostle Paul became a published advocate of organized religion, then you've either lost sight – or have never dealt seriously – with the history of the man himself, or the content of his contributions to the New Testament.

According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul began his life as a privileged member of both Jewish and Roman societies. Born in the university city of Tarsus in Cilicia, a Roman citizen from birth, he was raised in Jerusalem among the upper tier of the Jewish political establishment. He received the best education possible "at the feet of Gamaliel," the greatest living master of Pharisaical instruction.

From both his breeding and his grooming, we should expect two qualities to have dominated Paul's character. First, we should have expected him to be consistently ethnocentric in his religion. In the ancient world, where cultural identity went hand in hand with ethnic religion, nothing could have been more natural than for Paul to promote Judaism. But as a strict Pharisee, he would have been expected to maintain the strictest religious distinctions between Jews and all others. Second, we should have expected Paul to be intrinsically elitist. As one born to social privilege, he would have been expected to uphold the rigid social structures that maintained his elite status.

Yet never would we expect to find Paul advocating on behalf of a movement that transgressed both cultural and social boundaries. Never in life would we expect to find him proclaiming a faith that placed Jews and non-Jews, men and women, freemen and slaves on an equal footing before God. Nothing in Paul's background prepares us to see him advocating the first globally *organized* and truly trans-cultural *religion*. Why would a man promote that which would undermine his own comfortably high position?

Yet this is precisely what we see in the New Testament. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Again, his letter to the churches of Galatia, he writes, "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." And still again, in his letter to the church in Colossae he writes, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

The Apostle Paul, then, is a far more astonishing advocate of organized religion than any of the men with whom we began. Those "Four Horsemen of New Atheism" have (or in the case of Hitchens, had) far less to lose from conversion than the Apostle Paul lost by his. They collect handsome royalties, while Paul never took a salary. They receive fashionable publicity, while Paul received beatings, imprisonment, and finally execution. It's easy to see what they gain from their hostility to organized religion. But what did Paul gain from his advocacy of it?

In a beautifully haunting passage from his letter to the Philippians, Paul himself gives us the answer. “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

For Paul, organized religion – a new global identity founded on Christ rather than ethnic origin or social standing – was the key to everything true and lasting. In Christ, Paul found what neither his race nor his education could ever provide: a restored relationship to God, hope in the face of sufferings, and ultimate resurrection from the dead.

If Paul was right, then the same benefits are available to you and me today. Will you receive them?

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