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BIBLE STUDIES FOR THE ENTHUSIAST

PAUL'S TIME IN ARABIA

An Examination of Two Interpretive Perspectives

73 TWENTY MINISTRIES

A TEACHING MINISTRY OF DR. ROBERT C CROWDER

73TWENTY MINISTRIES: CHARTING THE WORD, NAVIGATING FAITH

Rooted in a lifelong passion for teaching and guiding others in Biblical truth, 73Twenty Ministries is devoted to helping believers navigate the depths of Scripture with both clarity and conviction.

The name 73Twenty holds deep personal significance: it comes from my childhood home at 7320 Greenwood Boulevard in Denver, Colorado. It was here that the foundations of my faith, study, and service were first laid. With the majestic Rocky Mountains ever-present on my horizons, God's Word has been a constant guide and presence throughout my life. The logo of 73Twenty Ministries, with its three mountain peaks in gray, blue, and orange, symbolizes not only the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also the unwavering foundation of Biblical truth upon which our faith is built.

For more than twenty years, I've served as a pastor, teacher, mentor, and author, committed to making Biblical truths accessible and applicable. Through sermons, Bible studies, books, articles, and other teaching resources, 73Twenty Ministries exists to equip believers, strengthen churches, and proclaim the Gospel. Our mission is both simple and profound: to chart the Word, guiding faith, and helping others anchor their lives in Scripture.

At 73Twenty Ministries, we believe that faithful Biblical study should engage the mind, transform the heart, and shape daily life. Whether through exegetical teaching, character studies, theological exploration, or practical application, every resource is crafted to deepen understanding, strengthen conviction, and encourage obedience to God's Word.

As a ministry grounded in a conservative Baptist, dispensationalist approach, we focus on Biblical exposition, doctrinal clarity, and practical discipleship. We uphold the belief that Scripture is the authoritative, inerrant, and sufficient Word of God, and it's our privilege to help others navigate its timeless truths.

I invite you to explore the resources at 73TwentyMinistries.com and join us on this journey of discovery, growth, and unwavering faith. Together, let's stand on the mountain of God's truths and proclaim His name to every generation.

For His glory alone,

Dr. Robert C. Crowder, Th.D.

Founder, 73Twenty Ministries

PAUL'S TIME IN ARABIA: AN EXAMINATION OF TWO INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVES

INTRODUCTION

The question of what transpired during the Apostle Paul's sojourn in Arabia following his conversion on the Damascus Road has generated considerable discussion among biblical scholars and theologians.¹ Two primary interpretive approaches have emerged: one emphasizing the absence of physical interaction between Paul and the risen Christ during this period, and another suggesting a unique season of direct divine instruction. This paper examines both perspectives, allowing Scripture to speak while acknowledging the legitimate scholarly positions held by conservative theologians on both sides of this discussion.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

All evangelical scholars agree on the basic scriptural framework provided in Galatians 1:15-18 and Acts 9.² Paul's own testimony establishes several key facts: his immediate departure to Arabia rather than Jerusalem, his emphasis on receiving the gospel "by the revelation of Jesus Christ" rather than from human sources, and the three-year timeframe before his first apostolic consultation in Jerusalem.³ The interpretive question centers not on these facts, but on their theological implications and practical outworking. Was Jesus with Paul in body or spirit?

PERSPECTIVE ONE: THE ASCENSION CONTEXT VIEW

Theological Position

This view, represented by many systematic theologians and biblical commentators, emphasizes that Christ's physical presence on earth concluded with His ascension (Acts 1:9-11). Proponents argue that Paul's Arabian experience, while involving divine revelation, did not make up a physical encounter with Jesus comparable to the disciples' pre-ascension experiences.

Supporting Theologians and Arguments

John MacArthur consistently maintained this position, arguing that Paul's Damascus Road experience was with the glorified, ascended Christ, and that subsequent revelation came through spiritual means rather than physical presence.⁴ He emphasizes that Paul's classification of his encounter as the "last" resurrection appearance (1 Corinthians 15:8) suggests a unique, concluding vision rather than an ongoing physical relationship.⁵

R.C. Sproul similarly argued that Paul's time in Arabia involved intensive study and divine illumination of Old Testament Scripture, enabling him to understand Christ's fulfillment of

messianic prophecy.⁶ Sproul emphasized that the Spirit's role in teaching (John 16:13) adequately explains Paul's theological development without requiring physical presence.⁷

James Montgomery Boice taught that Paul's Arabian retreat parallels Moses' Sinai experience or Elijah's wilderness sojourn; times of divine preparation through revelation and reflection rather than sustained physical encounter.⁸ He noted that Paul's emphasis on receiving truth "not from man" (Galatians 1:12) refers to the source and authority of revelation, not necessarily its method.⁹

Textual Considerations

This perspective notes that:

- Acts provides no indication of ongoing physical appearances after Damascus¹⁰
- Paul's own writings describe his relationship with Christ in terms consistent with other believers' spiritual communion¹¹
- The ascension narratives suggest finality to Christ's earthly, physical ministry phase¹²

PERSPECTIVE TWO: THE DIVINE SEMINARY VIEW

Theological Position

This interpretation, while acknowledging Christ's ascension, suggests that Paul's Arabian period involved a unique form of direct instruction from the risen Lord. Advocates propose that Christ, in His glorified state, provided Paul with intensive theological education comparable to the training the Twelve received during His earthly ministry.

Supporting Theologians and Arguments

Warren Wiersbe frequently described Paul's Arabian experience as his "seminary with Jesus," arguing that Paul's comprehensive theological understanding required more than a mere illumination of existing Scripture.¹³ He emphasized that Paul's apostolic authority demanded direct commissioning and instruction from Christ Himself.¹⁴

John Phillips, in his biblical commentaries, suggested that Paul's detailed knowledge of Christ's earthly ministry and teachings (clear in his epistles) indicates he accessed information beyond what he could have learned from written sources or brief encounters with other apostles.

H.A. Ironside taught that Paul's unique apostolic calling to the Gentiles required specialized preparation that paralleled but differed from the Twelve's training.¹⁶ He argued that Christ's post-resurrection appearances to various individuals (Luke 24; 1 Corinthians 15:5-7) established a precedent for ongoing divine encounters.¹⁷

Textual Considerations

This perspective emphasizes:

- Paul's claim to have received his gospel "*by revelation of Jesus Christ*" (Galatians 1:12)¹⁸
- The comprehensive nature of Paul's theological understanding¹⁹
- His apostolic authority and direct commissioning language²⁰
- The parallel between his three-year preparation and Christ's three-year ministry with the Twelve²¹

Areas of Agreement

Despite their differences, both perspectives affirm several crucial doctrinal points:

1. **Divine Authority:** Paul's message possessed full apostolic authority regardless of the specific means of reception
2. **Scriptural Sufficiency:** Paul's teachings, however received, became authoritative Scripture
3. **Christological Consistency:** Both views maintain orthodox Christology regarding the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension
4. **Soteriological Unity:** Neither interpretation affects the gospel's essential content or Paul's role in proclaiming it

Hermeneutical Considerations

The interpretive difference often reflects broader hermeneutical approaches:²²

Grammatical-Historical Method

Those emphasizing the ascension context tend to stress the historical progression from earthly to heavenly ministry phases.²³

Theological Integration

Proponents of the divine seminary view often emphasize systematic connections between Paul's unique apostolic role and his preparatory experience.²⁴

Both approaches respect the principle of *Scriptura Scripturae interpret* (Scripture interprets Scripture) while reaching different conclusions about the implications of parallel passages.²⁵

Practical Implications

For Biblical Authority

Both perspectives uphold the complete authority and inspiration of Paul's writings. The "how" of revelation does not diminish the "what" of revealed truth.

For Christian Experience

The first view emphasizes the normative nature of Christian spiritual growth through Scripture, prayer, and the Spirit's illumination. The second view highlights God's sovereign ability to work extraordinarily when He chooses, while not necessarily making such experiences normative.

For Apostolic Succession

Neither view supports ongoing apostolic office, as both recognize Paul's unique historical role in the foundational period of the church.

CONCLUSION

This examination reveals that godly, conservative theologians can reach different conclusions while maintaining commitment to biblical authority and orthodox doctrine. The text of Galatians 1:15-18 provides the essential framework while leaving certain details to faithful inference and theological integration.

Rather than demanding definitive answers where Scripture exercises restraint, perhaps the wisest approach recognizes that God's methods of preparing His servants may vary while His purposes remain consistent. Paul's Arabian experience, whether involving ongoing physical encounter or intensive spiritual revelation, accomplished its divine purpose: preparing the apostle to the Gentiles for his unprecedented ministry.

The unity of conservative scholarship on Paul's divine calling, apostolic authority, and scriptural contribution demonstrates that this interpretive question, while interesting and worthy of study, does not threaten essential Christian doctrine. Both perspectives call believers to trust in God's sovereign preparation of His servants and to receive Paul's writings as the authoritative Word of God, regardless of the precise mechanics of their original reception.

As with many questions touching the intersection of divine sovereignty and human experience, Scripture provides sufficient information for faith and practice while preserving elements of mystery that call for humble acceptance of revealed truth and grateful acknowledgment of God's ways that are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).²⁶

FOOTNOTES

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