

Paul from Zealot to Suffering Servant (Gal 1:11-17) and modern Religious Zeal

by

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Paul serves for us as an important role model in his passion for the gospel of grace, his emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, his missionary activity and his sufferings for Christ. But to see him as a model of religious zeal is directly to contradict his own version of his turn *away from* contemporary Pharisaic and Zealot values of *theological education, violent action* and *legalism* to a new ideology of the *suffering servant*. We have much to learn from this—there is an urgent need for our churches to understand, live out and teach the new values of Jesus’s kingdom, prone as we so often are to drift back into vain religiosity.

1. Zealotry, Elijah and Sinai in Arabia

The revelation of the risen Jesus to Paul is first recounted by Paul himself in Galatians (typically dated around 50-55 AD). Luke’s version (Acts 9), and his account of two retellings on the lips of Paul (Acts 22; 26) are generally thought to have been written around 30 years later (80-85 AD). The Acts accounts appear to agree that the revelation occurred in the form of a bright light and a voice on the road to Damascus, and that after the healing of Paul’s eyes, and baptism in the Holy Spirit and water (absent from Acts 26), he began ministry in Damascus (absent from Acts 22) and then in Jerusalem. However, the earlier Galatians account mentions only a ‘revelation’, a trip to ‘Arabia’ and a *return* to Damascus:

... the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ [δι' ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ]. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous [ζηλωτῆς] was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born [ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός μου, Isa 49:1], and who called me by his grace [διὰ τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ], was pleased to reveal [εὐδόκησεν ... ἀποκαλύψαι] his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone [σαρκὶ καὶ αἵματι]; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia [ἀπῆλθον εἰς Ἀραβίαν], and returned again to Damascus. (Gal 1:11-17 ESV)

Most commentators explain this trip to Arabia as a first missionary journey to the gentile Nabateans,¹ a problematic suggestion, since there is evidence that Damascus was itself part of the Nabatean kingdom of 'Arabia' (2 Cor 11:32), and so 'Paul would seem to say that he went from a city of Arabia into Arabia, which would be like saying that one went from London into England',² or, in our context 'from Jos into Nigeria'. Burton is more helpful, arguing that the contrast with 'flesh and blood' (v. 16) forces us to understand the trip to Arabia as a retreat—'he sought communion with God'.³

In a brief but important article,⁴ N.T. Wright goes further. He draws attention to Paul's use of the term ζηλωτῆς, 'zealous' (v. 14; similarly Acts 22:3; also Acts 21:20).⁵ The *Zealots* (to whom the disciple Simon belonged, Matt 10:4 and parallels) were a Jewish sect, founded to fight the Romans in the 1st century BC, but deriving its ideas from the Maccabees' fight against the Greeks in the 2nd century BC (1-2 Macc, esp. 1 Macc 2:24-27). They are called by Josephus the 'Fourth Philosophy' (*Jewish War* 18.23), alongside the Pharisees (typically characterised as legalistic and hypocritical), Sadducees (typically rich and rationalistic) and Essenes (gnostic, exclusive

¹ Betz, H.D., *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); Longenecker, R.N., *Galatians* (Word Biblical Commentary 41; Dallas, TX: Word, 1990); Matera, F.J. in Harrelson, W.J. (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) *in loc.*; Ngewa, S. in Adeyemo, T. (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Association of Evangelicals of Africa, 2006) *in loc.*

² Rejecting these suggestions, Burton, E.d.W., *Galatians* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1921) 57.

³ Burton, *Galatians*, 55.

⁴ Wright, N.T., 'Paul, Arabia, and Elijah (Galatians 1:17)', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996) 683-92.

⁵ For a broader treatment of this term, its Hebrew cognate נָצַר, and the relationship between 'zeal' and 'jealousy' (the two English words are in fact derived from the same Greek word ζῆλος, *zēlos*), see Oyelowo, V.O., *An Exegetical Study of נָצַר לַיהוָה, 'A Jealous God' in Exodus 20:3-6 and its relevant Message for Today* (unpublished MTh diss. TCNN, 2007).

and other-worldly), but in fact the Zealots were more of a political group—what today we might call ‘freedom fighters’ or even ‘terrorists’. Wright shows how a number of traits of the pre-revelation Saul correspond to zealotry (though Saul may not have been a member of an official ‘Zealot party’).

The Zealots had two main role models. *Phinehas* was the zealous priest, grandson of Aaron, who killed an Israelite who was having sex with a Midianite woman and thereby brought an end to a plague on the nation (Num 25; Ps 106:28-31; Sir 45:23-25; 1 Macc 2:26, 54).⁶ *Elijah* was the great prophet who killed the prophets of Baal, and called fire down from heaven (1 Kgs 18:40; 19:10-18; 2 Kgs 1:9-15; 2:23-24; Sir 48:1-11).⁷ If Saul was committed to Zealot ideals, Elijah certainly figured highly among his role models. And so the obvious place of divine revelation to him (if not also by means of association with Moses) was Mount *Sinai*, or ‘Horeb’, where Elijah heard the ‘still small voice’ (1 Kgs 19) before he went on to Damascus (as did subsequently also Paul). As we read later on in the letter to the church in Galatia, Mount Sinai is in ‘*Arabia*’ (Gal 4:25, the only other reference to Arabia in the NT).

Wright’s argument from *zealot* to *Elijah* to *Sinai/Horeb* to *Arabia* seems to me strong. If it is right, it should be foundational for our understanding of this major about-turn⁸ in Saul/Paul’s personal spirituality. According to Luke’s account, the revelation of the risen Jesus turned a *persecuting* Saul into a *persecuted* Paul (‘I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name’, Acts 9:16). But in this earlier account by Paul himself writing to the church in Galatia, it, even more graphically, turned a *zealot* into a *suffering servant*.

Saul of Tarsus was being told, through his whole Damascus Road Christophany, that the way of zeal was not the way by which the eschatological mission was to be accomplished ... Paul may here be indicating that he had exchanged the role of Elijah-like zeal for the role of the servant [Isa 49:1-6].⁹

2. Revelation and Arabia

Wright has thus shown us that Paul went to Sinai, as a zealot following in the footsteps of Elijah, and we must now read his story in this light. However, Wright does not comment on the relationship between the

⁶ Ortlund, Dane, ‘Phinehan Zeal: A consideration of James Dunn’s proposal, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 20.4 (2011) 219-315.

⁷ Wright, ‘Arabia’, 684-5.

⁸ For the purposes of this article, I am deliberately avoiding the term ‘conversion’, which is problematic when used of a Jew recognising in Jesus the Jewish Messiah.

⁹ Wright, ‘Arabia’, 687-8.

revelation and this journey to Sinai. A careful reading of the Greek text may help here.

In Galatians 1, Paul is concerned to demonstrate that, just as his commissioning was not a matter of church politics but divine election (v. 1) even from birth (v. 15), so too the ‘good message’ he had told the Galatians was not a human idea which could be competed with by other human ideas (vv. 6-9), but a direct revelation (ἀποκάλυψις, vv. 11, 16) from God himself, which therefore even an angelic voice could not contradict (v. 8).

This experience of revelation is described as,

ὅτε δὲ εὐδόκησεν [ὁ θεὸς] ... ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί, ... , εὐθέως ... ἀπῆλθον εἰς Ἀραβίαν
when [God] was pleased to reveal his Son to me, ... immediately ... I went away into Arabia (vv. 15-17, ESV)

This may at first glance be understood to mean,

‘Once God *had* [as he had previously decided] revealed his Son to me [on the road], then I went to Arabia [*i.e.* Sinai].’

This is to read εὐδόκησεν as an *auxiliary* verb (functioning a little like an adverbial phrase—‘to be so good as to ...’), and ἀποκαλύψαι as a *main* verb. The verb εὐδοκέω is used in this way (like Hebrew רצו in 1 Chron 28:4; Ps 40:14) in:

- Ps 40:14 LXX ‘Be pleased to deliver me!’ (meaning ‘Deliver me kindly!’; MT רצו)
Est 13:13 ‘I would have been willing to kiss’ (meaning ‘I would have kissed willingly’)
Sir 25:16 ‘I would rather live with’ (meaning ‘I would live more willingly’)
1 Macc 6:23 ‘We were happy to serve’ (meaning ‘we served willingly’)
Luke 12:32 ‘it is your Father’s good pleasure to give’ (meaning ‘he gives willingly’)
Col 1:19 ‘was pleased to dwell’ (meaning ‘dwelt willingly’)
1 Thess 2:8 ‘we were ready to share’ (meaning ‘we shared willingly’)

This reading situates the revelation on the road to Damascus and thus agrees well with the three accounts in Acts. *But if Paul had just received a revelation of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, why did he then need to go to Sinai, the place of revelation* (Burton and Wright above)? Would Paul of all people write of a full revelation of the risen Jesus *sending* him to Sinai? Surely that would be grace sending him back to Law, or a Jesus-encounter requiring mystical ‘gnostic’ filling-out!

An alternative and equally legitimate way to read this text is,

‘When God *had decided* to reveal his Son to me [at his chosen time *cf.* Gal 4:4], then I went to Arabia [*i.e.* Sinai ... to receive the revelation]’

This is to read εὐδόκησεν, as a *main* verb, and ἀποκαλύψαι, as its verbal complement. The verb εὐδοκέω is used in this way (meaning ‘to decide’, ‘to agree’ or ‘to prefer’; like Hebrew רצה in 1 Sam 2:25; Isa 53:11) in:

- Ps 68:17 LXX 'the mount that God desired for his abode' (meaning 'the mountain that he chose'; MT דגמ)
- 1 Macc 14:41 'the Jews and their priests *decided* that Simon should be ...'
- 1 Macc 14:46 'and all the people *agreed* to grant ...'; similarly 14:47
- 2 Cor 5:8 'we *would rather* be away'
- 1 Thess 3:1 'we *decided* to be left alone'

Thus this main-verb reading is as well attested as the auxiliary reading (in the Septuagint Old Testament and Deuterocanon, and in the New Testament, and in particular the Pauline writings). And it leaves the actual revelation to happen later—at Sinai itself.

Thus, taking this text in its immediate context, εὐδόκησεν is best understood as referring to God's *decision* to reveal. And since v. 17 refers to a 'return' to Damascus, it seems fair to understand this initial decision as having been revealed to Paul in or near Damascus. But *the actual main revelation happens at Sinai itself*. This supports Burton's and Wright's arguments about revelation in Arabia, the relationship to Elijah's theophany, and in fact Paul's whole theological emphasis about Jesus standing in the place of the Law.

Looking at a broader context, we can say that something happened in or near Damascus (described in more detail decades later by Luke) which communicated to Paul God's desire to grant revelation. Thus the proud Saul, so 'zealous for the traditions of his fathers' (Gal 1:14), having received a visit just like the despairing Elijah, 'no better than his fathers' (1 Kgs 19:4), went on to Sinai/Horeb, where Elijah's first words were, קנא קנאתי ליהוה, Ζηλῶν ἐζήλωκα τῷ κυρίῳ, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD' (1 Kgs 19:10, 14; compare Paul's Ζηλῶν ἐζήλωκα τῷ κυρίῳ, 'so extremely zealous was I'). If we have followed the parallel thus far, we must surely assume that Paul then heard, after the 'wind', 'earthquake' and 'fire' of his own violent campaign of persecuting Christians, something like that 'still small voice' which Elijah heard (1 Kgs 19:12), and then a voice which told him to go to Damascus and declare a king and a prophet (1 Kgs 19:15-16).¹⁰

Rejection of Pharisee and Zealot ideals or 'false spiritualities' of *religious education, violence, and legalism*, and adoption of Jesus's 'suffering servant ideal' of *voluntary suffering and martyrdom* is the

¹⁰ Some readers may object to this reading that it is far from those in Acts, in which the revelation begins and ends on the road. However, it seems to me a principle of Christian integrity towards what biblical texts actually say, and of humility towards their inspiration, that we should not 'harmonise' biblical texts, but allow them to say what they say, even at risk of them appearing to contradict each other. In the current case, even if harmonisation is attempted, one should surely take the *earlier* eyewitness version in Galatians as primary, and attempt to harmonise the Acts versions to it, not *vice versa*.

prophetic message of Paul's about-turn, and so it should be of the church. And yet we know, from the Bible, Church history and our modern experience, that God's people are often 'foolish' like the Galatian Church (Gal 3:1), weak in faith and cowardly in the face of suffering, and so easily 'bewitched' back into false spiritualities. We are often simply wrong, but even when rightly intentioned, we may use the wrong means to the right ends, try to build the kingdom with the straw of human effort, 'zeal', or 'superspirituality' rather than the gold of God's grace, and so end up giving glory to Christians, not to Christ, their Master. The remainder of this paper applies some of these insights to our Nigerian Church context, tracing in turn each of Paul's false zeals, and then his adoption of the suffering servant ideal.

3. Zeal for Education

Paul was a highly educated biblical scholar (Acts 22:3; 26:4-6), once accused of being so educated it had driven him mad (Acts 26:24), and yet he described his biblical and theological qualifications as a *disadvantage*, a 'waste of money' (ζημία, Phil 3:7-8) and 'filth' (σκύβαλα, Phil 3:8), and served Jesus alongside illiterate fishermen, even deferring to them in matters of doctrine (Acts 15; Gal 1:18-19; 2:1-10). This humility was unprecedented in the spirituality of the Jewish nation which had for over 300 years been trying to stand up to Hellenistic culture, largely through asserting its own educational traditions (see the Jewish books of Wisdom, Jesus ben Sira *etc.*), far from rejecting 'modern' education! In subsequent Church history too, there have been many more who have followed Christ *into* education than have followed him *out* of it!

Theological institutions such as TCNN claim by their very existence that there is a need for education in the Church, and may aspire, like Paul, to 'enslave' it to the cause of Christ (2 Cor 10:5) and to use it to subvert worldly wisdom (similarly 1 Cor 1:18-2:16). And yet many parts of the Church have lost healthy proportions here.

One way in which this is reflected in the life of our churches here in Nigeria is in the use of deliberately obscure and exaggerated language—*often as if the quality and quantity of our words could in themselves bring in God's kingdom!* This may often be the sin of pride, but often again it may be, not knowledge, but 'zeal without knowledge' (Prov 19:2; Rom 10:2)!

Many of the expressions commonly used in our churches are *obscure*, and simply not understood by either the speaker or his hearers. Of course, technical academic terms in English such as 'soteriology', 'pneumatology',

‘propitiation’ and ‘eschatology’ do not need to be understood by the average Church member. But expressions of praise and honour to God used every day in Church life (in whatever language) certainly should be understood by Church leaders and all adult members—as a matter of respect for both God and for the community (1 Cor 14). Church meetings are not to be *a waste of time*, and (as students are taught) *one should never use a word without really knowing what it means*—anything else is immature (1 Cor 14:19-20).

In fact, many of the most common terms used in superspiritual prayers are *not biblical at all*. ‘*Father King of Glory*’ is a strange combination of a New Testament title for God, ‘Father’, with an Old Testament one, ‘King of Glory’. Similarly, Christians in Chad often refer to God as ‘*Dieu trois fois saint*’ (‘thrice-holy God’), obviously referring to the Seraphim’s cry ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ (Isa 6:3), but mentally combining it with the much later Christian doctrine of the trinity (‘*Dieu en trois personnes*’, ‘God in three persons’). And people often refer to the *shekhina*, and to the *cherubim*, and *seraphim*, not realising that the term שכינה, *shekhina*, ‘presence or glory of God’, is not in fact biblical at all but originated in early Jewish occult writings; the כרובים, *cherubim*, in the Old Testament are hybrid animals (like Egyptian *sphinxes*, Middle-Eastern *griffons* or Greek *chimeras*; ‘living creatures’ in Ezek 1); and the שרפים, *seraphim*, are flying snakes (Greek *basilisks* or European *cockatrices*; Num 21:6, 8; Isa 14:29; 30:6).¹¹ In deep reverence and awe at such mysterious things, we should really be careful what we say (Jude 8-10)!

¹¹ These are accepted results of scholarship, but since they differ so greatly from typical Christian false assumptions, some references may be useful: ‘In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is often mentioned as ‘sitting on cherubs’. These are lower deities often depicted as winged lions. In Phoenician temples the throne seat of the deities is often flanked by griffin-like figures, which in all probability are to be understood as representing cherubs, whose wings make up the side pieces of the arms and back of the chair. Thus it was natural for people of the Northwest Semitic region to envisage that a deity could be surrounded by servants represented by lower deities in the shape of serpents or dragons. Within the phenomenology of religions it is well attested (worldwide, in fact) that serpent- or dragon-like deities may act as protectors in the divine sphere.’ ‘From the ... data ... , it is beyond doubt that the Hebrew word שרף means ‘cobra’ ’ (Provençal, P., ‘Regarding the Noun שרף in the Hebrew Bible’, *JSOT* 29.3 (2005) 371-79, 373, 378.). ‘The many variations of cherubim represented in the Bible—examples with one or more faces; with human, leonine, bovine, or aquiline faces; with two or four legs—correspond to various forms of composite beasts depicted in ANE art, particularly the art of Assyria ... By virtue of their combining features of different creatures or having more of such features than real animals or persons, they were unnatural. These characteristics made them apt symbols for divine presence, since deities moved where humans could not and were something other than either animals or humans. The cherubim of the Bible are hardly the round-faced infant cherubim known in Western art.’ (David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (electronic ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 900.).

Use of the actual biblical name and titles of God is an even more serious matter. God's name יהוה, YHWH, 'Yahweh', is holy (Luke 1:49; Lev; 1Ch; Psa; Isa; Ezk; Amo 2:7) and not to be 'profaned' (treated as an everyday thing). This is why Christians, following Jesus and the apostles, have traditionally used the euphemistic title 'LORD' (Septuagint κύριος, *kurios*; Vulgate *dominus*; Hausa UBANGIJI) instead, wherever YHWH appears in the Bible. It is described in Phil 2:9 as the 'name above all names', which was inherited by Jesus. But it also appears in the short form יה, 'Yah' or 'Jah' (the *J* is a Latin influence) in the call to praise יהללו-יה, 'Hallelu-Yah', 'Praise Yahweh', one of the most abused words in all our churches (surely the holy name of God is not to be used in testing a microphone! Sir 23:9-10). The terms משיח, *Messiah*, χριστός, *Christ* and *Anointed One* are synonymous and really just mean 'God's chosen King'. But 'Son of God' (Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; Luke 1:35) and 'Son of Man' (Dan 7:13 as interpreted in the New Testament) both mean this too—they are originally messianic titles for 'God's chosen King' (see for example Matt 16:16; Luke 1:32-3; 4:41; 22:67-70 'Christ ... Son of Man ... Son of God'; Acts 9:20-22 'Son of God ... Christ'). If Christians had better understood the symbolic meaning of 'son' in the Bible, we might never have ended up with the Catholic tradition of 'Mary, the mother of God', and the Islamic tradition of لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ, *lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*, 'He doesn't beget, nor is He begotten' (*Qur'ān* 112:3). *Christians' overuse of biblical terms which they do not understand is often responsible for unbelievers' confusion, and their rejection of the Gospel!* Even the term 'Lord' in the New Testament may be either a euphemistic equivalent of YHWH, or the proper title for the ultimate ruler (in cultural context, this was the Roman Emperor). So when 1st-century Christians declared their faith as Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, 'Jesus is Lord', they were saying more than just the local Berom *Yesu a sé Gbong Gwòm mot*, 'Jesus is our paramount ruler'—they were saying, 'Jesus is the ultimate ruler of the whole known earth'. These are all *big* words, not to be taken lightly!

These few examples should suffice to show how often our prayer and praise language falls into error as a result of pretentiousness—excessive zeal for appearing to be highly educated. But they should also show that the *reality* of God's lordship is even greater than we had thought. So many of these terms have lost their real depth of meaning through over-use (in linguistic terms, they have become 'bleached'). If we research them, we may well discover some things that are unexpected, or even seem strange, but right understanding will inspire much more genuine awe and praise than the empty mouthing of unknown terms. *A correct understanding of the*

words we use and where they have come from inspires even more praise than did our old wrong ideas!

In addition to obscure language, we may often often fall in to *exaggeration*. It may seem strange to refer to any language about God as ‘exaggerated’. After all, surely no human language can ever suffice to describe God (this is the Christian doctrine of God’s ‘ineffability’). And yet *repetition* (‘Higher higher, higher higher higher higher higher higher, lifting Jesus higher’) and *emphasis* (or volume!) may not in fact contribute more to our *meaning*, only to its *expression*—and so they give more honour, not to the *object* of our speech, but to the *speaker* himself.

The most obvious example is perhaps the excessive use of the term ‘*In Jesus’ name*’.¹² This expression appears in no prayer in the Bible—it is never addressed to God! It is only used in the context of healing (Acts 3:6; 16:18), baptism (Acts 2:38; 10:48) and teaching (Acts 4:18; 5:40; 9:27), and its use in prayer can only be justified by reference to John 14:13-14 (also 15:16; 16:23-26). The term is certainly biblical, but the way in which it is used by some Christians as a ‘charm’ to start and end every prayer, journey, meal *etc.*, though it has parallels in the Catholic tradition of ‘crossing oneself’ in the name of the Trinity, and in the Pentecostal tradition of repeating Jesus’s name many times when driving out demons or sicknesses, is surely essentially *Islamic*, based on the expression بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ, *bismi llāhi rrahmani rrahīmi*, ‘In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful’.

The name *Jesus* (a common 1st-century name) is used in many other contexts too, without any biblical basis. It is often used as an expletive, ‘*Jesus!*’; and when my son recently fell into water, an onlooker cried, ‘*Jesus, Mary and Joseph!*’.¹³ This use of the name ‘Jesus’ as an expletive comes, it seems to me, again from *Islamic* traditions (compare the expressions *Alhamdulillah!*, *Barakallah!*, *Wallahi!* *etc.*) or from African Traditional Religion, where certain words may have magical power in warding off evil spirits. Either way, this is not a biblical practice

Of course, the fact that something is not mentioned in the Bible does not make it bad. However, we should be aware of the origins of our Christian subcultures, whether they lie with European secularism, African Traditional

¹² Compare here Prof. Danny McCain’s excellent article on ‘The Theology of the Phrase “Blood of Jesus”’, *TCNN Research Bulletin* 41 (March 2004) 4-19.

¹³ Western Christians typically describe these last two cases as ‘taking the Lord’s name in vain’ and so accuse Nigerians of breaking the third commandment (Exo 20:7 // Deu 5:11). But they are wrong to do so—this third commandment in fact refers to *taking formal legal oaths by the name ‘YHWH’*. This is probably the sense in Pro 30:9b too.

Religion or Islam. And since our God is, unlike the gods of the nations, not in need of any of our big words, and far above the power to praise of the human breath which he created, we may find that, by trying, in these and many other ways, to ‘exaggerate’ our language about Jesus, we actually do *dishonour* to the one who truly is deserving of the ultimate in human honour. Praise language was foundational to the early church, including giving special titles to Jesus, and we see this in the earliest Christian songs (e.g. Phil 2, Odes of Solomon) and in the early creeds which we still use today. And in fact it is extremely important that we maintain praise, including especially specific address to God, and specific reference to Jesus, who is our saviour and the only one who gives us the right to address God. But all of this must be done thoughtfully and reverently (1 Cor 14).

Finally, careless and exaggerated reference to God may also be damaging in terms of *Christian-Muslim relations*. In periods of history when God’s people have had little contact with other religions, they may have been less precise in their reference to the one they worship—they may have just said ‘God’. But when the Israelites came into close contact with the worshippers of other gods at the exile (6th century BC), they took some of their earlier pre-exilic Psalms and replaced the general term אֱלֹהִים, *elohim*, ‘God’, with the proper name יהוה, *YHWH*, ‘Yahweh’, presumably to clearly identify the subject/addressee of the Psalm (compare the ‘Elohistic’ Psalm 53 with the ‘Yahwistic’ Psalm 14, for example). Similarly, prayers addressed to ‘God’ or ‘Lord’ may have been perfectly clear in monocultural and monoreligious Europe (the only significant local contact with Islam before the modern era was in Spain, 711-1492 AD), but in modern Nigeria where many are saying that we all worship the same God really, we will of course share basic terms with Muslims (e.g. in many languages *Allah*, often *Isa*, and Christian use of most of the 99 names), but we may often want to make clear that our رَبِّ, *rabb*, ‘Lord’, our تَنْزِيلِ, *tanzīl*, ‘revelation, ‘hypostasis’, even our *Allah*, is *Isa al-Masih*, Jesus Christ, the only way to the Father.

In all of the above, and many other, areas, we as those ‘little children’ to whom has been granted to know ‘the secrets of the kingdom’, need to be thoughtful and cautious in our use of language in worship lest we seem to be exalting our own education over the honour of our master Teacher, and pursuing a gnostic spirituality in which *what* we know becomes more important than *Who* we know. Education may have its place in the life of the Church, but vaunting it in worship through obscurity and exaggeration is shameful before God and an abuse of his people.

4. Zeal for Violence

Saul was a very zealous Israelite, and he believed that violent action was a legitimate expression of his religion. We first meet him approving of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1), then raging against Christians in both words and action (Acts 8:3; 9:1-2, 13, 21; 22:3-5; 26:9-11; Gal 1:13-14 καθ' ὑπερβολήν, 'exaggeratedly'; 23; Phil 3:6a). There are individual Old Testament precedents for such actions, such as the stoning of the blasphemer (Lev 24:10-23), the Sabbath-breaker (Num 15:32-36) and Achan (Jos 7), but as we have seen, this was above all a tradition in the line of Phinehas and Elijah, augmented by the experience of the Maccabees under the Greek Antiochus Epiphanes (who sacrificed pigs in the Jerusalem Temple, and erected there an altar to Zeus, known as the 'abomination of desolation') and then the Zealots under the Romans.

Paul indicates in [Gal] 1:14 that he belonged, before his conversion, to the tradition of "zeal for the law." This zeal led him not just into zealous study and prayer but into violent action. ... Saul belonged to the majority [Shammaite] party among the pre-70 Pharisees, who, when given a chance, were prepared to use violence to defend the honor of their God and his Torah. Like many others in this movement, he looked back to the great heroes of zeal, Phinehas and Elijah, and almost certainly to Mattathias and Judas Maccabeus as more recent representatives of the same tradition.¹⁴

The revolutionary zealots hated the Romans and wanted to cleanse the land with acts of vengeance on behalf of God. They were activists who believed they could force God's hand, for God would honor their zeal by removing the Romans.¹⁵

Though one might see some good in the Zealots' agenda to 'defend the honor of their God' and to 'cleanse the land', such a separatist and supposedly theocratic agenda inevitably offends against secular law:

such zealots might also maim, kill, or destroy the property of others who disobeyed the Law.¹⁶

This of course is what we have seen perpetrated even by members of churches in Jos in recent years.

Jesus clearly opposed the Zealots' agenda. When James and John, like Elijah, wanted to call fire from heaven, Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55). And when Peter, like Phinehas, drew a weapon in Gethsemane, Jesus rebuked him that those who use weapons will be killed with weapons (Matt 26:52).

For Jesus, the fundamental principle for interpreting the law was not "No Lord [κύριος] but God" (the Fourth Philosophy [Zealots]) nor the command to "be holy" (Pharisees

¹⁴ Wright, 'Arabia', 684, 691.

¹⁵ Rhoads, D., 'Zealots', in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (electronic ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 1054.

¹⁶ Rhoads, 'Zealots', 1045.

and Essenes) nor the concern for proper temple worship (Sadducees) but the command to love God and to love one's neighbor, including one's enemy, as oneself.¹⁷

Even the apparently innocent political agenda expressed by the disciples after the resurrection ('will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' Acts 1:6) was met, not with 'you will be my generals', but 'you will be my witnesses [μάρτυρες]', which they of course all did not by *killing* for him, but by *dying* for him.

for Paul, it was the death of Jesus at the hands of the pagans, not the defeat of the pagans at the hands of the heaven-sent zealous hero, that defeated evil once and for all: "he gave himself for our sins, to deliver us from this present evil age" (1:4).¹⁸

It has been said that,

Zeal is behavior motivated by the jealous desire to protect one's self, group, space, or time against violations.¹⁹

But if one has already been appointed King of heaven and earth, with the whole world under one's feet, or if one is a follower of such an ultimate King, protectionism is completely unnecessary. Defensive, protectionist Christians have obviously not understood how great their King is—they are people of very little faith! People of great faith, by contrast, entrust the future of their own lives, and that of their communities, to God and his ultimate power and justice.

As for Christianity on the *offensive*, a secular historian has written:

The idea of fighting on behalf of the Christian faith probably goes back at least to the emperor Constantine. ... this idea has no place in the New Testament nor in the centuries when Christians were a persecuted minority ...²⁰

Fighting for religion *did* have a place, of course, in early *Islam*, and it is striking that it was Islam that provoked Christendom to the peak of its militancy in the Crusades (12th-13th centuries), as European 'Christians' encouraged themselves that *Dieu le veult!*, 'God wills it!', and that anyone who killed a Muslim would have all his sins forgiven and go straight to paradise (bypassing purgatory). In this sense, the Crusades were of course a resounding victory for Islam, as it conformed Christendom to its likeness. As in Jos today, Christians have learnt new kinds of cruelty from those who hate them, and ultimately, in some cases, far surpassed them in evil.

¹⁷ Rhoads, 'Zealots', 1054.

¹⁸ Wright, 'Arabia', 691-2.

¹⁹ Rhoads, 'Zealots', 1045.

²⁰ Montgomery Watt, W., *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972) 49.

5. Zeal for Legalism

Saul was a very strict, religious man. He says of himself, ‘according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee’ (Acts 26:5), and describes himself as having been, ‘as to righteousness, under the law blameless’ (Phil 3:6b). Though ready to *kill* for their religion, the Maccabees and Zealots were also very ready to *die* for it, as we see in the deaths of those who refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath (1 Macc 2:29-38) or to eat pork (Eleazar, and the lady traditionally known as ‘Hannah’ and her seven sons, 2 Macc 6-7). And yet such heroic loyalty to God can so easily become exaggerated legalism. This was apparently the case of the Essenes at Qumran, the Pharisees as addressed by Jesus, and the Judaisers addressed by Paul (Gal 6:12-15). Tragically the Church, which is explicitly *not* ‘under the law’, has repeatedly fallen into extremes of legalism, the early Syriac-speaking church forbidding sexual relations even to married couples and baptizing only virgins (compare 1 Cor 7:5; 1 Tim 4:3),²¹ the mediaeval European church developing a complex system of acts of ‘penance’ in place of simple forgiveness, and seeing whole flurries of enthusiastic young monks castrating themselves, modern western evangelicalism including Appalachian snake handlers, and the Spanish Catholic church seeking crucifixion volunteers, and some modern Nigerian churches claiming that certain debatable practices which they taboo are in fact tabooed by the Bible. Even apparently good practices such as all-night prayer easily become a ‘duty’ rather than a delight, and voluntary abstention or asceticism can gradually turn into a community taboo (Col 2:20-23). As has been famously said,

HERESIES are *partial* views of the truth, starting from some truth which they exaggerate, and disowning and protesting against other truth, which they fancy inconsistent with it.

All heresies are partial views of the truth, and are wrong, not so much in what they directly say as in what they deny.²²

It is notoriously difficult to define legalism, and to distinguish between it and ‘faithfulness’, and we know in any case that it is a matter of attitude and right balance, not tangible right and wrong. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that many of those who join our churches from Islam, traditionalism or secularism become thereby *more* burdened by ‘dos and don’ts’, not *less* so!

²¹ Philip, T.V., *East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia* (Delhi: ISPCK & CSS, 1998).

²² Newman, J.H., *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians*, vol 2 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903) p. 143 s.v. ‘Heresies’.

6. A new Zeal: The suffering Servant

Zeal for education, violence and legalism may have many sources. *Personal insecurity* is a common source of narcissistic zeal, and must have been part of Saul's life. He is described in a 2nd-century work as 'a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked' (*Acts of Paul*); he may have had an eye problem (Gal 6:11) and lacked the Greek oratorical skill of some of his detractors. *Worldly-mindedness* may also create activists, believing that we can fix our own lives and achieve our own ends (or even God's!); this is simply a lack of faith. And as we have already seen above, *other religions* such as Islam may affect our thinking. Islam truly is a this-worldly system (or a 'realised eschatology'), which expects the rule of *Allah* to be reflected in the rule of Muslims over others, and it has surely contributed a lot to the popularity of various forms of 'Dominion Theology' or what I term 'ethnic election theology' among Christians here in Plateau State.

A genuine encounter with the risen Jesus does away with these things and frees us to serve. And it is not so much the fact that it is *Jesus*, as that it is the *risen* Jesus. The primary importance of this revelation for Paul's ministry was that it made him an eye-witness of the resurrection and so qualified to be an apostle. Similarly, the church needs to live in the light of resurrection if it is to live as a suffering servant.

The concept of permanent resurrection developed in the intertestamental period, provoked largely by the growth of martyrdom. Isaiah 53:10b-12a is an early resurrection text, coming as it does after a reference to the suffering servant's 'grave' (v. 9). As, under the Babylonians and Persians, Jews were threatened with death for their faith in YHWH (Dan 3; 6; though Dan 3:17-18 shows resurrection was not yet expected), resurrection thinking was developed (Dan 12:1-3). And when the great onslaught came under the Greeks (1 Macc 2:29-38; 2 Macc 6-7), this thinking became more common (2Macc 6:26-7; 7:9, 14 ἀνάστασις, 28-29, 36; 12:43-45 ἀνάστασις; 14:37-46). God was using the circumstances of history to guide his people into fuller understanding. And by the first century, this was one of the key theological issues maintained by Pharisees, Jesus and Paul against the Sadducees (Mark 12:18-27; Acts 17:32; 23:6-9; 24:15, 21; 26:8).

A Christian understands that the promise of resurrection relativises the value of this life and that martyrdom is in fact the ultimate honour among God's people (Rev 6:9-11). When the 2nd-century 'Apostolic Father', Ignatius, was being taken to Rome to be martyred, he wrote to the church in Rome, pleading with them *not* to intercede for him:

Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Rather entice the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb, and may leave nothing of my body; so that when I have fallen asleep [in death], I may be no trouble to any one. Then shall I truly be a disciple of Christ, when the world shall not see so much as my body. (Ignatius to the Romans, ch. 4)

Extreme as this example may be, we cannot be struck by the writer's great faith, and in fact this is the key issue—activism is faithless, whilst martyrdom is the ultimate mark of faith. This is why the famous chapter which begins 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11:1) then praises as heroes of the faith so many people who 'died in faith, not having received the things promised' (Heb 11:13)

As disciples of the word we must take a stand against 'voices' if those voices emanate from the wrong source. We have to, sometimes, take a stand against 'feelings'. Occasionally, we even have to take a stand against 'facts'. After all, it was a 'fact' that Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children. It was also a 'fact' that hungry lions eat people and fiery furnaces burn them up, as in the case of Daniel and the Hebrew children. Faith produces its own facts. Those facts will endure because they are based upon the eternal word of God. (unknown, Bridges for Peace)

This faith which transcends the years of our life 'in the flesh' is why Paul was able to reject zealotry and instead pursue the path of the 'suffering Servant', as described by Deutero-Isaiah (Gal 1:15 cites Isa 49:1 'from my mother's womb') and depicted by Jesus. In Acts we see Paul explicitly modelling the structure of his ministry on the life of his Master—up to his desire to die in Jerusalem.

7. Conclusion

A popular British evangelistic tract entitled '*Earn-Burn-Learn-Turn!*' contrasts worldly passions for *wealth* ('earn'), *violence* ('burn'), and *education* ('learn'), with our need to simply *repent* ('turn') and be passionate instead about *Jesus*. It well expresses my own journey through disaffection with my father's money, Communism's revolutionary ideals, and finally the world of academia, and my growing understanding of what it really means to *turn* from these things, and for Jesus to be *everything* to me. Many have come to follow Christ through such dramatic rejection of other passions. And yet, like the 'foolish Galatians' to whom Paul was writing (Gal 3:1), we so easily fall back into lust for these things and even for religious *zealotry*. We develop theological arguments to justify our passions for *wealth* ('prosperity theology'), *violence* ('dominion theology'), *education* (exaltation of the 'Rev. Dr.') and even *morality and ethics*

(‘legalism’). Meanwhile, God is calling us, as he did Elijah and then Paul, to hear his ‘still small voice’, annihilate not the world and its evil but *ourselves* (Matt 10:39 uses the verb ἀπόλλυμι, ‘to destroy (oneself)’ and live ‘by faith in the Son of God, who loved [us] and gave himself for [us]’ (Gal 2:20).