

Paul's Letters as theologizing in contextual conversation

Here we must begin to discover exactly what we mean when we discuss the theology of Paul in his letters. This process involves a particular understanding of the nature of these letters and their content.

Paul's letters are essentially his direct communication with his mainly gentile congregations of which he is the **community founder**.

The letters are means of communication at a distance. A way of keeping in touch, in addition to people, envoys or so who travel between the group of apostles/missionaries etc and the communities.

The character of these letters is widely discussed – are they private letters, official letters or a mixture of both. Since they are not about Paul's and his assistants' personal relationship in the sense family or friendship in an ordinary way they are not private letters – but they since there is neither an institution nor a business company or the like involved – they are not official letters either – a mixture of both – they are personal in that they are the continuation of the conversation between people who know each other and are personally related to each other – Paul also uses family/kinship language to express the close relationship – the issue of belonging. He and the group around him also write from a position which they perceive as authoritative – they are the ones who are in a position to give guidance to the addressees, in the vein of a teacher, leader etc. Thus there is an 'official' aspects to these. We know from a later period that there were letters sent from synagogues to synagogues – or from major centres to smaller groups within Judaism – we do not know whether such a practice already existed in the first century – maybe something like this – as we do know that at that time there was regular consultation between the Jewish communities in Babylonia and Jerusalem.

Whatever category the letters are seen in – they are not a book, treatise etc but 'occasional' literature – addressing specific issues in a particular community at a particular time – they allow us to get a glimpse of a process of communication between earliest followers of Christ – and issues that were important for them – in their concrete lives – and their working out what life in Christ actually meant/looked like.

There was an ongoing communication process at all ends – Paul with the group around him – within the communities, between these and others – other leaders etc.

After Paul and those with him left a community he had founded – obviously with some teaching of Christ and life in Christ involved – the communication was maintained by various means: People close to Paul visited cf slide.

Letter writing is the only form of written communication which is not a one –way process but inherently conversational.

The fact that letters are written indicates that there is a mutual interest in maintaining the relationship – even when the tone is not always ‘nice’.

The aim of the communication was mutual building up – support etc (1 Cor 10.23; 1 Cor 14.26b ‘let all things be done for edification’)

Keeping in touch and continuing the conversation obviously had a specific purpose: Everything has to do with life in Christ – in that sense they are theological. They are documents of theologizing in process and via communication! Theologizing in conversation!

Thus Paul's specific statements are not to be read as theology *as such* - they are pastoral advice and counsel, emanating sometimes from the words of Christ but sometimes only from Paul's own wisdom as a follower of Christ (1 Cor. 7:25). They may also be based on Scripture (1 Cor. 10:1f.) or on developing patterns in Paul's relations with his congregations - "my rule in all the churches"(1.Cor. 7:17).

However, **Paul's advice is context-specific**, it is sent to a particular congregation, in a particular place, at a particular period in its history. What he says is determined first of all **by the needs of the congregation**. This means that Paul's letters were not circular letters, or regular news-letters produced on a frequent basis, such as our modern congregational or official church publications. They were truly **occasional**, i.e. they originated essentially as Paul's **responses to issues in the congregations**.

One may visit the doctor on a routine basis for regular treatment or in an emergency - Paul's letters are more like an emergency call.

Calvin Roetzel in Paul, the Man and the Myth:

‘...Paul did not begin his apostolic ministry with a developed theology in his mind, and...he often did not know what he thought about a given subject until he faced a context that required its discussion, and the composition of a written statement. Paul's theology must be viewed as an emergent theology and not a systematic theology, as an interactive theology...as a product of a dialogue rather than a monologue.’ (p.4)

Paul has to **respond to a problem** in one of his communities and he **reacts** accordingly. We need to note this **response-reaction** element in the letters and in their content, because their content is not determined primarily by Paul sitting down

like a scholar and working out in the rarified world of his study, his personal *reflections or beliefs in a particular area* of thought in a rational and conceptually-coherent manner.