

Paul – Apostle and Theologian

1. Introduction

Paul is undoubtedly the most influential and well-represented writer in the New Testament. The letters attributed to him form a substantial part of the New Testament canon; indeed, the only other author to have contributed so extensively to the canon is the author of Luke-Acts. But even in the case of Acts, the focal point of its narrative from the ninth chapter onwards is the call-vision of Paul on the road to Damascus and his subsequent missionary activity. And while the Gospels and Acts are clearly dependent on a number of different traditions and sources, Paul's letters amount to a forceful expression of the faith of one man and of his commitment to the preaching of the Gospel. Without doubt it is in Paul's writings that we find the clearest scriptural definitions of baptism, the relationship between believers and Israel or the Law, and the believers' hope for resurrection. All these convictions stem from Paul's claim to have seen the risen Christ and to have received the Gospel as the direct result of divine revelation.

Paul's teaching finds its roots in his preaching and missionary work throughout the regions of the eastern Mediterranean. It is believed that he spent around thirty years of his life as a Christian missionary. He himself was directly responsible for establishing a multifarious group of people who were of Jewish, Greek and Roman descent. He attracted individuals from various social strata, including slaves and officers from Caesar's household. It is estimated, moreover, that he travelled over six thousand miles over land during his time as a missionary, not to mention his numerous sea voyages.

2. Factors to be Considered

2.1 When we speak today of theologians, we tend to think about individuals who isolate themselves in their studies to write a systematic account of such topics as sin, salvation, faith and hope. But this was clearly not Paul's way of doing theology. It was not his strategy to sit in complete isolation and prepare an outline of his ideas about such themes as justification by faith or about the person of Christ. Paul's teaching stems from his responses to specific individual situations as they arose in different Christian communities. It is the particular needs of individual churches that account for the content of Paul's letters. Thus, for example, if the Corinthians had not adopted an unacceptable form of behaviour in relation to the Lord's Supper, it is unlikely that

we would have such detailed knowledge of Paul's teaching about the eucharist. Furthermore, we would probably not know as much about his views on justification by faith if it were not for the fact that some communities, such as those in Galatia, were being encouraged to view righteousness as inextricably linked to one's obedience to the Law. Paul's theology therefore amounts to his response to concrete circumstances.

2.2 Students of early Christianity often overlook the fact that Paul offers the earliest written testimony in the New Testament. Despite the order of writings in the New Testament canon, the earliest surviving Gospel (Mark's Gospel, written shortly before or after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD) was written about twenty years later than the earliest of Paul's letters.

2.3 Since it is Paul's letters alone that enable us to reconstruct his theology, one factor to be taken into account is that it is extremely likely that at least some of his letters have not survived (there is evidence to this effect in 1 Corinthians which mentions a previous letter written by Paul to the Corinthian congregation). It is possible, for example, that his critical stance in his correspondence with a particular community had angered its members to such an extent that they had discarded the letter he sent to them. One cannot, moreover, rule out the possibility that some of his letters simply got lost. We know, for example, that many gospels were written about Jesus (including the Gospels of Thomas and Philip), but only four gospels found a place in the New Testament canon. These considerations are simply noted in order to demonstrate that it can prove problematic to claim that we have a clear and comprehensive picture of Paul's theology on the basis of his surviving letters.

3. Sources relating to the Life and Writings of Paul

In the first place attention must be paid to those letters written by Paul himself. Scholars during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries sought to answer the question: how many of the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament are authentic Pauline letters? There is general consensus that Paul wrote the letters to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, while the majority of commentators would also accept 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Philipians as genuine letters of Paul. There is more scepticism about Ephesians, which many interpret as a letter written by a disciple of Paul who seeks to imitate his style and theology.

To what extent can the Book of Acts be used as a source for information about Paul? Many commentators have interpreted Acts as the framework for reconstructing Paul's life and have placed his letters within that framework. For historical reasons Paul's own testimony must be given priority. There are some aspects of Paul's missionary activity that are not even mentioned in the Book of Acts, including references to his conflict with the Galatians and the Corinthians. Furthermore, Acts does not mention perhaps the most important fact about Paul, namely that he wrote letters to early Christian communities. One should not draw the conclusion that the Book of Acts lacks historical credibility, but it cannot be assessed as a comprehensive report of Paul's life and works.

The differences in detail between the descriptions of Paul's preaching in Acts and in his own letters should not, however, be overemphasized. In general terms the portrait of Paul encountered in Acts is consistent with what we learn about him from his own writings. Luke, for example, goes out of his way to stress that Paul's interpretation of the Gospel is geared towards the Gentiles and that he founded several churches in Asia Minor. But some caution is necessary when using the Book of Acts as a source for the life and ministry of Paul. To understand his theology, Paul's own letters provide the foremost and most illuminating testimony.

4. The Life of Paul

It is impossible to discuss the teaching of Paul without taking into account the background and life of the apostle. Paul's theology is the product of reflection on his own experiences. His intellectual prowess, his cultural and religious upbringing and the resources at his disposal, all provided him with the necessary tools to interpret his experience of the risen Christ. It must again be borne in mind that Paul viewed his own role primarily as an apostle rather than a theologian. His principal aim was to preach and promote the gospel, which he regarded as 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Rom. 1:16).

Paul's most significant contribution was that he established the mission to the Gentiles. It was he who secured that Christianity ceased to be a sect within Judaism, but grew into an universal church. By virtue of his own identity and experiences he was able to bridge the gap between the Jewish and Gentile worlds. He was a Jew, indeed – according to Philippians 3:5-7 – a zealous and pious Pharisee who took pride in the traditions of his fathers: 'Circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a

Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless'. Paul's Jewish heritage is undoubtedly the most formative influence on his thinking, even after his Damascus road experience. But Paul was also a Jew from the Diaspora, and spent most of his childhood in Tarsus living in a predominantly Gentile environment. Tarsus was an important commercial and cultural centre, clearly accounting for the influence of Greek thought on his writings. He sometimes cites the work of Greek poets (1 Cor. 15:33) and uses metaphors drawn from Greek customs and traditions (adoption, the marketplace). He regarded it as important that he communicated with his Gentile audiences in language and images familiar to them, but filled these images with a Christian content.

5. The Core of Paul's Theology

5.1 Justification of Believers: What was the core of the Gospel preached by Paul? The basic facts of the Gospel for him can be summarised in four verbs: Christ died, he was buried, raised and was seen. This is the sum of the kerygma described in 1 Corinthians as the tradition handed over to him and which he now transmits to the Corinthians: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, then he appeared to over five hundred brothers' (15:3-6).

But what precisely did Paul mean when he preached Christ as died and raised by God? In the first place it must be remembered that Paul was of Jewish descent, and as a Pharisee he would have been steeped in the belief expressed in Deuteronomy that every criminal hung on a tree was accursed in the eyes of the Jewish Law (see Gal. 3:13). It was no easy matter for him to announce that the Messiah had in fact been crucified as though he were nothing more than a common criminal. Indeed, in 1 Cor. 1:23 Paul refers to the cross as a 'stumbling-block for the Jews'. The result of his experience on the road to Damascus was that he was forced to reassess his convictions about his relationship with God. He had to reinterpret the significance of the Jewish Law in his own life and acknowledge that he had encountered the crucified Christ who had been risen from the dead. Paul came to interpret faith in Christ, not the Jewish Law, as the only path to salvation.

How, therefore, according to Paul, does Christ secure justification? Once again we must return to the kerygma outlined in 1 Corinthians, for the answer lies in Jesus'

death and resurrection. Jesus had been condemned and crucified as an accursed criminal, but when he was raised from the dead he was vindicated or justified by God (as though God had pronounced a 'not guilty' verdict on the one who was condemned in the eyes of the Jewish Law). And it is on this act of righteousness that the justification of believers also depends.

5.2 Sin and Salvation In the opening chapters of his letter to the Romans Paul focuses on humanity's need for salvation; all human beings, he declares, are sinful because of their existence 'in Adam'. The root of human sinfulness is the refusal of all human beings to place their trust in God. The solution is to be found in Christ's death, for although Paul does not often speak of Jesus' death in sacrificial terms, in the third chapter of Romans Jesus' death is described as the act that cleanses humankind of its sinfulness. But Jesus' life as well as his death removes the plight of human sin. God has sent his son into the world to be united with humankind. And since he was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh, Paul states that he became sin. In 2 Corinthians 5:5 it is stated that Christ identified to such an extent with the human condition that he accepted the punishment for sin, death. Jesus' death cannot therefore be separated from his life.

5.3 Death and Resurrection Jesus' death cannot be divorced from his resurrection (note 1 Cor. 15:14). Christ was vindicated in his resurrection and pronounced the Son of God. And in the same way as Christ identified with human life and death, human beings can, through baptism, share in his death and resurrection by living 'in Christ'. Those who are united with Christ share in his resurrection and are restored to a relationship with God. The resurrection of the believer with Christ amounts to a transformation described by Paul with the aid of the language of sonship (cf. Gal. 4:6-7), and enables believers to address God as 'Abba, Father'. Jesus is the Son of God who makes manifest the purpose of God, but through adoption believers strive to share with him the status of righteousness before God.

5.4 The Body of Christ To live 'in Christ' not only signifies the relationship between the believer and Christ, but points to the communion that is to exist between believers. Paul uses the metaphor of the body of Christ to convey this dual relationship between Christ and the believer on the one hand and between believers on the other. 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it' (1 Cor. 12:27). All members of the body must be open to the one who controls them, Christ himself. This is not a kind of unity forced upon them from the outside, but one created from the inside. Since Christian communities were surrounded by other religions and were themselves

subjected to internal divisions, the call to manifest their role as members of Christ's body is a call for believers to stand united. In addition to emphasizing the importance of church unity, the image of the body of Christ stresses that there is room for diversity within this body of many members.

5.5 Ethical Conduct To remain in the body of Christ the believer must adopt a proper ethical conduct. There was clearly a danger, in view of Paul's teaching on the Jewish law, for some of his readers to draw the conclusion that Christianity was a religion free of moral codes and ethical principles, as seems to have happened among some of the Corinthian members. A popular slogan was, 'all things are lawful for me' (6:12). Paul stresses the fact that freedom in Christ is not to be equated with immoral behaviour. For the Jew, proper moral conduct amounted to complete obedience to the Law. But since Christ is the path to salvation, obedience to him is the pattern to be emulated by his followers. Being 'in Christ' means partaking of those attributes that characterized Jesus' own life – goodness, holiness, wisdom, joy and love. Christ did not die instead of believers, but as their representative: 'We have died with Christ', 'we have been raised with Christ', 'we are glorified with Christ'. The former life belongs to the past, whereas the new life of the believer amounts to conforming to the pattern of Christ's life.