

On Reading Paul's Letters

Reading Letters from the Past

Imagine clearing an attic after the decease of a family member, a great aunt, known only to you by oft repeated stories of far-away people and places long ago. There are endless souvenirs and relics of all kinds, not really now of very much interest to you. But suddenly you come upon a bundle of carefully preserved letters with Australian postmarks faded but reasonably legible, and most with dates still clearly visible on the envelopes. Curiously you begin to read snippets and gradually you realize you are back again to the time of your father's youth some fifty year's ago when there was a major family dispute because of the marriage of your father's younger sister.

At the age of eighteen, she had fallen in love with a neighbour's son recently returned from the navy. His reputation preceded his naval career-it was generally believed he had had to flee the country because he was in all sorts of trouble. When he suddenly reappeared, the young woman, who had grown up in the years he was abroad and knew little of his previous escapades, found him irresistible. Despite all the resistance of her family, she was determined to live with him. When the family refused to allow her to marry, the couple secretly married and went to live in Australia, never to return. Their story had come down to you as one of disaster, going to a strange place in the Australian outback, to a life of poverty, struggling to survive with small children, few comforts and much loneliness.

Since the family had refused to have anything more to do with their 'lost' daughter, the only contact that was directly maintained was through this elderly aunt who dared not even mention that she was still in touch with her. The letters prove to be most illuminating-they are full of colourful experiences-hardly a word about poverty or hardship. They tell of young woman who is full of life and vitality, whose life is not always easy, but who is enjoying living. Slowly you come to realize that you are learning a completely different version of events, your aunt's own story and that told as she had experienced it.

Approaching Paul's Letters

Approaching Paul's letters for the first time, is similar to the experience recorded above. They are from someone known to us by report but at a great distance. They are about someone reputed to be a great missionary and founder of churches as described by Luke in Acts. From centuries of tradition handed down in the Christian family, we already have a certain image of the Apostle, of his life and work, as the first great theologian of Christianity.

By his opening the door to the gentiles, he established Christianity as a universal religion and brought emancipation from the burden of the Jewish law. His letters have become a charter of

freedom especially since the Reformation, when they served as a weapon in the struggle for emancipation from ecclesiastical domination.

This traditional image of Paul leads us to expect his letters to *be theological essays on significant doctrines* of the new faith for the edification of believers. We anticipate timeless theology rather than history. However as we discovered in our story above, the image of a person transmitted within the family may not always be accurate. Her own letters may reveal a very different image, especially when read in the light of her own particular circumstances.

So too with Paul. *The image transmitted in traditional Christianity must be checked against the record of the Apostle's own letters and revised accordingly.* We can never view him entirely without some presuppositions, but we must read his letters in such a way that they are allowed to speak for themselves. In order to do this we need to understand the context in which they were written. The distance in time and in space may make this a very difficult task. Life fifty years ago in Australia is difficult enough to envisage, but life in first century Roman Empire much more so. Even Luke in the book of Acts, writing about Paul and his travels some thirty years after the events, cannot give as precise and as accurate a picture as Paul himself, writing in the midst of his missionary activity. As far as possible we must attempt to reconstruct the circumstances of the author and the recipients. Knowledge of the ancient world whether through Classics or Ancient History is exceedingly useful. We need to gain a certain knowledge of the general history of the period. But valuable as this is, it may not be precise enough.

Recreating the Context of the Letters

The problem is that we can know the particular circumstances of the author only from the occasional snippets of information incidentally mentioned in the course of the letter. This is our main source. Our picture is therefore necessarily incomplete as the letters were never intended to give an accurate historical overview of the period. Nevertheless when Paul's letters are carefully analysed, they do yield considerable historical information. But even this may be incomplete. On the basis of these partial glimpses amplified by filling in the gaps with a certain stretch of our imagination, *we must try to reconstruct what was actually happening. Several reconstructions maybe possible from the same basic data.*

Some letters do of course provide specific factual information, similar to the letters found in the attic. Some bore postmarks and addresses, indicating precisely from where and when they had been sent. So too with Paul's letters, for example, that they were written from a particular place such as Ephesus and address particular problems in a specific church such as those in the church at Corinth. They do reveal something of the circumstances both of the author and of the recipients i.e. that when Paul wrote to the Romans, there were divisions among the Christians there, and that he was about to embark on a journey to Jerusalem. But such information is not adequate to enable us to recreate with any degree of certainty the actual situation Paul presupposes among his addressees. Names of unknown people, significant to the individual at the period of writing, appear without proper explanation. They may be people who briefly or forcefully interacted with the life of the writer or the community, but who received no detailed mention. On the other hand some details may acquire undue significance such as the recording of Paul's forgetting his cloak at Troas.

The problems involved in any reconstruction of Paul's historical context are most obvious when we try to identify his particular opponents. Whom does Paul mean to refer to when he calls them 'dogs' or 'false teachers'? Those who view the Apostle as the emancipator from Jewish law may tend to presuppose that most of his opponents are of Jewish origin. This however is oversimplification; surely such a forceful character would meet opposition from diverse directions and that for a variety of reasons. Moreover it would be most surprising if the same opponents contended with Paul in different geographical locations at different periods of his mission activity. In view of this, greater precision is now regarded as essential in the analysis of Paul's letters. *The tendency to generalize in presupposing the same group of opponents in all the letters is imprecise and unwarranted.*

We need to look at *each* letter and seek to reconstruct the circumstances applicable to the writing of *this specific document*. Only then may we compare and contrast the contents of one letter with those of another in order to obtain a general overview of the Apostle's thought. When we deal with the circumstances surrounding each letter individually we may in fact be able to identify one hypothesis that explains the total context as we know it better than any other. This hypothesis should then be regarded as providing the best explanation of Paul's thinking in one particular letter. If there is insufficient information to enable the creation of any explanatory hypothesis, we must admit defeat and simply acknowledge that we do not know the circumstances of writing or what Paul himself intended.

The Function of Paul's Letters

Since Paul was a much travelled and busy missionary, he must have had good reason in putting pen to paper, especially since letter writing was so much more onerous in his day than in ours-and for most of us it can be quite a burden. For a young woman abroad, very unwillingly out of touch with her own family there may be a variety of reasons in writing home. At the basic level, her letters may serve simply as vehicles of information, as evidence that she is alive and well for anyone who cares enough to want to know. So too Paul's letters may simply be *a means of passing on information* to his converts, keeping them informed of his movements.

Again the young woman may write home not because she thinks anyone will be interested in her news but more for her own sake than for anyone else's. She may desperately need to pour out her heart and a far-away friend is better than no one, even if she cannot expect to change anything. *Perhaps, psychologically Paul needed to express himself*, to put his deepest concerns on paper and he sent them to his converts, but more for the satisfaction of his own needs than of theirs.

But, on the other hand, the young woman in question being deeply unhappy with her isolation may not have been willing to leave things as they were but kept on writing in the hope that by her letters she could change the relationship between herself and her family and thus effect a reconciliation. So too Paul in his letters may not have been writing simply for his own needs, nor to pass on information, but *to effect changes in relationships by means of the letters*.

Another factor relevant to our topic is the relationship of the writer to the recipient. As a daughter, even as a rejected one, our letter writer may have hoped she still had some power to persuade because of her relationship to those she hoped to change. So too with Paul. In some cases his relationship to his communities is transparent- the Galatian Christians were at first very fond of him-they would have done anything he asked of them. But then this relationship suddenly changed as interlopers misled the community. So Paul writes really pointedly to them. Whilst reminding them of how close they had been to him in the past, Paul does not base his hopes for changing them simply on past or present friendship. Rather *he writes to them as an apostle, as sent by God and as the founding father of their Christian community.*

So his letter is more than a personal communication; it is also *an official document from one who is an ambassador* representing not just his own wishes but also the demands and ideals of the one who sent him -to which Paul also must be subject. He writes both as having a certain authority and also as subject to the one from whom that authority derives. In contrast to the rejected daughter who had no real power other than pleading her case, *Paul has significant power, but only if he can get his converts to acknowledge it* . As yet the church had not become institutionalized and, like our letter writer, he too hoped that in the end the recipients of his letters would voluntarily recognize the legitimacy of his guidance and follow it.

It is hard for us to envisage just how new were the communities Paul founded. True, there were some parallels with synagogues, but Paul's communities were mainly gentile rather than Jewish. Parallels too can be observed with philosophical associations and trade guilds but none of these were identical with, nor had the wide variety of members within, the Pauline communities. Just because they were so new, there was little to guide them and Paul's advice was essential. On their own, such communities would probably not have survived for long. But Paul and his associates such as Silas and Timothy visited them, and carried and sent letters to provide *a communication network* that enabled them to see themselves as part of a greater corporate whole, the church or the body of Christ. Neither was it simply a one-way communication; the Corinthians wrote to Paul and the Corinthian correspondence is part of his response to them. *Paul's letters functioned within and as part of an interactive communication network.*

Theology in Paul's Letters ?

From what we have stated above, it is clear that we regard Paul's letters as *real letters written to communities about to particular specific problems at a particular stage in their history*. At this point it is essential to distinguish between the *historical Paul* of the New Testament era and the *traditional image of Paul* in Christian history. The real letters read in the light of their reconstructed historical context reveal a very different person from the Apostle's attributed image as the first Christian theologian. Rather than consisting of pure timeless theology, they represent one side of an ongoing conversation about the resolution of practical issues facing the early Christians. *They are Paul's response as a Christian leader to questions and failings among the Christian congregations*. Thus Paul's famous poem on love in 1 Corinthians is not simply an essay on a Christian virtue but a response to the Corinthian community some of whom exaggerated the significance of certain gifts in a proud individualistic manner. Paul's response demonstrates that love is the greatest gift of all because of its communal contribution in mutual edification.

This indicates the nature of Paul's theology as *a response to living issues in the light of the Christ event*. Far from being timeless theological truth divorced from historical realities, Paul's statements are precisely related to the changing problems of believers in the first century Roman Empire. Strangely enough in the case of Paul, eternal truths emerge in the interaction of believing communities with the concrete realities of their own particular context in history.

Conclusion

If our discourse about ancient letters has taught us anything, we should now be more alert to *the distinction between an historical person and their attributed image*. This means that we must give precedence to the content of Paul's own letters as the *primary sources* even over the content of Acts, despite the fact that Luke provides invaluable *secondary sources* as a friend and fellow traveller with Paul. We should also be aware of the need to review *the presuppositions that we bring to an ancient text* and to try to prevent these from hindering the text speaking for itself out of its own historical context. We should also be aware that several reconstructions of this context may be viable and we should critically evaluate their differing potential for making sense of Paul's statements.

The main function of Paul's letters emerges when we see them as part of a communication network of basic Christian communities and their leaders involved in a joint enterprise of mutual support and development in the earliest days of their existence.

Being the earliest documents of Christian history, it was inevitable that these documents should gain immense significance as foundation texts of Christian theology. In the process they soon came to be regarded as eternal truths surpassing the temporal limitations of particular historical circumstances. But this elevation in the end has become self-defeating in that it obscures their relevance to real history and actual circumstances of life. Only in returning to the letters as real letters can their original theological relevance reemerge.