

Paul – Apostle and Theologian

1. Introduction

The only other author to have contributed so extensively to the canon as Paul is the author of Luke-Acts (even here the focal point from Acts 9 forward is Paul's call and missionary journeys). Paul's theology stems from his missionary activity (around thirty years) among Jews, Greeks and Romans.

2. Factors to be taken into Consideration

- i) Paul's theology stems from his responses to individual situations in different Christian communities. 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.
- ii) Paul offers the earliest written testimony in the NT. Mark's Gospel was written about twenty years later than the earliest of Paul's letters.
- iii) It is likely that at least some of Paul's letters have not survived. Some of his letters may have been misplaced or discarded.

3. Sources relating to the Life and Writings of Paul

How many are authentic letters written by Paul? He wrote Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and most would accept 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Philippians. There is more scepticism about Ephesians (a "deutero-Pauline" letter).

Can Acts be used as a source of information about Paul? His own testimony must be given priority, for some aspects of his life are not mentioned in Acts (e.g., conflict with the Galatians and Corinthians, and the fact that he wrote letters). However, in general terms the portrait of Paul in Acts is consistent with the evidence of his own writings (e.g., preaching and missionary work focused on the Gentiles).

4. The Life of Paul

Paul viewed his own role primarily as an apostle; his main aim was to preach 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). His most significant contribution was that he established the mission to the Gentiles.

According to Philippians 3:5-7, he was a zealous 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 was also a Jew from the Diaspora (Tarsus), living in a predominantly Gentile environment. He can cite the work of Greek poets (1 Cor. 15:33) and use metaphors drawn from Greek customs and traditions (adoption, the marketplace). He communicated with his audiences in language and images familiar to them.

Bibliography

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