

Introduction: Studying Paul the Apostle and Theologian

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. However, even in the case of Acts - Luke's second volume - 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. A variety of New Testament writings therefore testify to the key role played by Paul during the early decades of the early Christian movement. While the Gospels and Acts, moreover, are clearly dependent on a number of different traditions and sources, Paul's own letters amount to a forceful expression of the faith of one man in Christ and of his commitment to the preaching of the gospel. It is no mere accident that so many of Paul's letters have been included in the New Testament canon, for he was an incomparable theologian and, in many respects, an effective communicator. It is in Paul's writings, for example, that we find the clearest scriptural definition of baptism, reflections on the relationship between believers and Israel, and on the believers' hope for a future resurrection. This is not to deny that some aspects of Paul's teaching are difficult to explain and, as a result, they have been subjected to different interpretations. Nevertheless, 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 Christ-believing missionary (from about 33-35 CE onwards), during which time he became crucial in the process in the spread of the early Christian movement. Paul 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 career as a missionary, not to mention his numerous and dangerous sea-voyages.

The aim of this module is to focus on Paul's role as a missionary or traveller, but also as one who received the gospel message and developed it in his own distinctive way. This leads us to ask: what kind of thinker was Paul? In attempting to answer this important question, the following factors should be taken into consideration.

- (1) When we speak today of theologians, we tend to think about individuals who isolate themselves in their studies in order to write a systematic account of such theological topics as sin, salvation, faith, and hope. This, however, was clearly not Paul's way of doing theology. He was not a theologian working in an ivory tower; it was not his strategy to sit in solitude and prepare an outline of his ideas about such themes as justification by faith or about the person of Christ. It can be stated quite confidently that Paul's teaching stems from his responses to specific individual situations as they arose in different communities. In other words, 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. There is nothing static about his teaching, as is particularly apparent in 1

Corinthians where Paul addresses a specific, but complex, situation by offering practical and pastoral advice. He can indeed be termed a practical rather than systematic theologian.

- (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 canon, the earliest surviving gospel (Mark's Gospel) was written about twenty years later than the earliest of Paul's letters. This was probably his first letter to the Thessalonians (around 50-51 CE), whereas Mark's Gospel was written shortly before or after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

- (3) Who founded Christianity – Jesus or Paul? Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, claimed that Paul was the real founder of Christianity, in that he took the Jewish message of Jesus and turned it into a Greek type of religion that Jesus would not have recognized. This view is now largely discarded, due in particular to the rediscovery of the Jewish matrix from which Paul's theology and writings have emerged and are to be situated. Certainly there are quite obvious differences between the message announced by Jesus, which focused on the announcement of the kingdom, and the Gospel proclaimed by Paul which centred on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

To what extent, therefore, is it possible to identify lines of continuity between the claims of Jesus and the teaching of Paul? One recent commentator has attempted to articulate the issue as follows: 'Jesus may be said to be at the heart of Christianity, but Paul captured its mind' (Bruce Chilton). Undoubtedly, there is continuity between Paul's theology and Jesus' own teaching, but Paul also writes in the light of his own personal experience of the risen Christ. Paul says very little about his call to be an apostle; the important factor for him is that this was the moment when God chose to reveal his Son to him. It is probable that Paul had amassed a

great deal of information about Jesus and his followers before his call-conversion, and as a Pharisee he would certainly have been aware of the bitter conflicts between Jews and the followers of Jesus. What therefore happened to him on the road to Damascus was not so much that he heard about Jesus for the first time, but that this was the moment when he accepted the crucified and risen Christ as the Son of God. From that day onwards Paul became what one commentator has described as a 'Christ-intoxicated man'. As a result of his call, Paul realized that his mission was to preach Christ, even among the Gentiles. He could no longer accept that he had to be obedient to Jewish laws and customs, for God had now made himself manifest in a person rather than in an interpretation of the Law. There is certainly a change of perspective in Paul's letters, but his message cannot be described as a distortion of Jesus' teaching. This is effectively conveyed by the late R.S. Thomas in his poem 'The Covenanters' (*Later Poems: A Selection 1972-1982*) when he addresses Paul with the words: 'You are the mountain the teaching of the carpenter of Nazareth congealed into. The theologians have walked round you for centuries and none of them scaled you. Your letters remain unanswered but survive their recipients'. As this poem demonstrates, understanding Paul and his letters is not an easy task, but the fact that his letters have survived serves as testimony of their continued value and significance, and, as a result of those letters, of Paul's role as the mountain on the landscape of early Christianity.

- (4) Since it is Paul's letters alone that enable us to attempt to describe and delineate his theology, one factor that – according to many scholars – should 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 5:9, which mentions a previous letter written by Paul to the Corinthian congregation; see also the reference in I Cor. 7:1 to the letter

that Paul has received from them). Is it not possible, one could suggest, that some of these letters got lost, or even that Paul's critical stance in his correspondence with a particular community had angered its members to such an extent that they had torn up and destroyed the letter he had sent to them? We know, for example, that many gospels were written about Jesus (including the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip), but only four gospels found a place in the New Testament canon. A similar scenario can be envisaged as we study the letters of Paul. 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.

- (5) A further issue to be considered when studying Paul, his letters and his theology is that his interpretation of Christ is deeply influenced by his own personal experiences and by his own first-century context. It is extremely difficult for us to imagine ourselves in Paul's own situation. To a great extent we have an incomplete and unclear picture of the circumstances and problems facing early Christ-believers during the first century CE. There is undoubtedly a wealth of information at our disposal, while more and more material and sources about the period are becoming accessible all the time. However, it is virtually impossible for us to place ourselves completely in that period and situation. As we therefore attempt to determine the relevance of Paul and his message, some caution is required before we seek answers from Paul to questions in our own time that he himself never addressed during the middle decades of the first century ce. As stressed by David Horrell, 'We should not let our familiarity with Paul's letters blind us to the extent to which his 'world' is different from ours. That is not to deny that Paul can speak powerfully to our own context, whatever that context may be, but it is to suggest that we should try to avoid 'making Paul in our own image' rather than letting him be himself'.

As already noted, Paul did not set out to write a systematic theology and offer 'the last word' on a myriad of theological issues. However, the tendency throughout the centuries has been to fossilize his teaching – to attempt to find answers in Paul's letters to every situation in every period in the history of the Church.

Sources relating to the Life and Writings of Paul

In the first place, attention must be paid to those letters written by Paul himself, which are undoubtedly the most importance and obvious resource for the study of Paul. 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 a general consensus that Paul wrote the letters to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians and Philemon, but there is more scepticism about Colossians, 2 Thessalonians and particularly Ephesians, which many interpret as letters written by disciples of Paul who sought in his name to imitate his style and theology.

To what extent can the Book of Acts, the first attempt to narrate the history of the early Church (written during the eighties or nineties CE), be used as a source of information about Paul? Many commentators have interpreted the Book of Acts as the framework for reconstructing Paul's life and have placed his letters within that framework. It is certainly a valuable source of information about the earliest Christian groups in Jerusalem and about the ways in which the gospel spread from there to other cities in the Roman Empire. For historical reasons, however, 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. Problems also arise when one compares the testimony of Galatians (chs 1-2) and Acts when they describe Paul's visits to Jerusalem. 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.

Furthermore, Paul's speeches as recorded in Acts do not always reflect the characteristic features of his theology. Thus in the description of Paul's speech in Acts 13:16-41, he is depicted as referring to God's election of Israel, the promised land, the reign of Saul and David. In this description of the promise made to Israel, Abraham is not mentioned once. This contrasts significantly with his letters, where Abraham is portrayed as the focal point of the promise made to Israel (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:6-18). In Acts 13, moreover, Paul is addressing members of a synagogue who have not accepted the gospel, but it is also patterned and structured in terms similar to Stephen's speech in Acts 7. The content of the two speeches is clearly different, but their presentation probably represents the kind of methods adopted by Christian missionaries as they addressed Jews in synagogues, as well as reflecting Luke's theological interests.

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. Some caution is, nevertheless, 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.

The Life of Paul

It is impossible to discuss Paul's thought without taking into account the background and life of the apostle. Paul's thinking is the product of his deep reflections 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. As already noted, it must 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).

Thus Paul's most significant contribution was that he established the mission to the Gentiles. It was he who set the foundations in place whereby Christianity would, eventually, cease to be a movement 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.

Paul 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. 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 (for example, adoption and the marketplace). He clearly regarded it as important that he communicated with his Gentile audiences in language and images familiar to them but he also filled these images with a new content.